

**THE IMPORTANCE OF PHONOLOGICAL
AWARENESS IN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN
LANGUAGE VERY YOUNG LEARNERS**
A study with 5-year-old Catalan speakers

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Abstract

Phonological awareness (PA) is considered to be key in the acquisition of pronunciation and the development of other abilities in language learning. However, not much research has been done to determine its importance in the acquisition of English as a Foreign Language in very young learners. The aim of this research is to measure the level of phonological awareness of 5-year-old Catalan learners of EFL, through a PA test designed taking into account the participants characteristics. Furthermore, an analysis of the Catalan education legislation was done and, using this analysis and the PA test results; a focus group was carried out with professionals of education (2 Preschool teachers and an English teacher) in order to discuss and determine the importance and role of PA for EFL very young learners. The results of this study show that the PA level of the participants is average probably due to a lack of instruction and that in order to achieve better results in phonological awareness and smoothen the introduction of the written language, PA should be introduced as a basis of the EFL teaching program in Preschool education in Catalonia.

Key words: phonological awareness, English as a Foreign Language, very young learners, test design, Catalan education system.

Resum

La consciència fonològica (CF) és considerada clau en l'adquisició de la pronunciació i el desenvolupament d'altres habilitats en l'aprenentatge d'una llengua. Tot i això, s'ha fet poca recerca per tal de determinar la importància que té en l'adquisició de l'anglès com a llengua estrangera en infants. L'objectiu d'aquesta recerca és mesurar el nivell de CF d'infants catalans de 5 anys que estan aprenent l'anglès com a segona llengua, a través d'un test de CF dissenyat tenint en compte les característiques dels participants. A més a més, es va realitzar un anàlisi de la legislació educativa catalana i, utilitzant aquest anàlisi i els resultats de la prova de CF, es va dur a terme un *focus group* amb professionals de l'educació (2 mestres d'Educació Infantil i 1 mestre d'anglès) per tal de debatre i determinar la importància i el rol de la CF per a infants que estan aprenent l'anglès com a llengua estrangera. Els resultats d'aquest estudi mostren que el nivell de CF dels participants és mitjà probablement degut a una falta d'instrucció, i que per tal d'aconseguir millors resultats de CF i suavitzar la introducció de la llengua escrita, la CF s'hauria d'introduir com a base del programa d'ensenyament de l'anglès com a llengua estrangera a l'Educació Infantil de Catalunya.

Key words: phonological awareness, English as a Foreign Language, very young learners, test design, Catalan education system.

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1. Introduction

Learning a foreign language is, nowadays, a requirement *sine qua non* to succeed in life, and even one foreign language is sometimes not enough. Children, from a very young age, start learning a foreign language, generally English, because “the younger, the better”. However, the “how” is more important than the “when”, and phonological awareness is much a response to that question of “how”.

This study aims to determine the importance that this linguistic ability has for very young learners in the process of learning English as a Foreign Language. The sample taken for this study is composed of 17 5-year-old students and three teachers from Vedruna Berga School. The school was chosen because they start teaching English at a very young age and because the connections I had with it made it easier to contact them. However, the study could have been done with any school in Catalonia that started teaching English at least in the first year of Preschool education.

Firstly, this dissertation presents a compilation of theories and studies of some important researchers that contribute to the topic of the study. In some cases, the theories do not relate directly to the study but are necessary for the reader to make sense of the information that follows. Next, you can find a brief description of the study itself: its objectives, a contextualization of the participants and the school, and a description of the tools used and how they were designed. Followed by this information, the results of the three tools used are presented. I thought it was important to present the results of the study before analyzing them so that the reader can follow the structure of the dissertation without needing to go back and forth to look for information. Consequently, the analysis and discussion can be found at the end of the study. It is in this section where the reader is going to find the answer to the research question. Last, but not least, the conclusions close the dissertation with a brief reflection on the research objectives.

Before you start reading, I would like to say again that my main objective while writing this dissertation is that the reader enjoys reading and feels it like a smooth reading. I also wanted to achieve this linearity and simplicity in the reading by organizing the information in the same way that I think the reader needs to read it.

2. Justification

Phonological awareness is a new concept for me. We talked about it when we were learning about how children acquire their first language, and it caught my attention. Then, this year, we talked about phonological awareness in English, and I kept thinking about this concept. It was then when I decided I wanted to research about phonological awareness in English as a Foreign Language. I am also very passionate about Montessori materials and the autonomy that they offer to the learner, so at first, I decided to create a manipulative material following the Montessori principles that helped learners train their hearing ability to discriminate 4 pairs of English vowels. The idea was to do a pre-test and a post-test in order to determine the effectiveness of this material in the learners' abilities to discriminate and pronounce the vowels.

However, some factors made me decide to change the direction of my dissertation. This year I did my internship in Finland. This internship was until Easter. This fact led to two main problems: I could not do any present follow-up of the material, so I had to put too much pressure on the teachers; and I could not do the post-test until after Easter, which was too late for me. Therefore, I decided to keep the project shorter. I would focus on designing a phonological awareness test for Catalan 5-year-olds learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and analyzing the Catalan Primary Education Curriculum, as well as carrying out a focus group with preschool teachers and English teachers. My research question is whether phonological awareness is important for English as a Foreign Language very young learners.

3. Theoretical framework

3.1. Teaching pronunciation

It is “critical that the approach to teaching pronunciation is systematic and that pronunciation instruction becomes an integral part of the process of learning English from the very beginning” (Zielinski & Yates, 2014, p. 65). With this quote, the authors make it clear that we cannot think any more of pronunciation as a plus or as something you need to care about when you already know English. However, we cannot traditionally teach pronunciation either. Pronunciation has always been corrected and never taught. Moreover, as Morley (1991) states, students have always struggled to achieve “perfect pronunciation”, and this goal is almost never achievable. Consequently, it becomes a frustration for both students and teachers. So the aim is not to achieve native-like pronunciation: “Within communicative activities, specific attention is given to stabilizing a student’s emerging abilities to adjust vowel and consonant pronunciation [...] to express intended meaning, and to increase intelligibility” (Morley, 1991, p. 498). To this idea, Grant (2014) adds that “only those aspects of pronunciation that interfere with intelligibility will be addressed. Because accent is not the problem, it is not put in a negative light” (p. 149).

Goal 1: Functional intelligibility

The intent is to help learners develop spoken English that is (at least) reasonably easy to understand and not distracting to listeners. (See Figure 3, Speech Intelligibility Index.)

Goal 2: Functional communicability

The intent here is to help the learner develop spoken English that serves his or her individual communicative needs effectively for a feeling of communicative competence.

Goal 3: Increased self-confidence

The intent here is to help learners become more comfortable and confident in using spoken English, and to help them develop a positive self-image as a competent nonnative speaker of English and a growing feeling of empowerment in oral communication.

Goal 4: Speech monitoring abilities and speech modification strategies for use beyond the classroom

The intent here is to help learners develop speech awareness, personal speech monitoring skills, and speech adjustment strategies that will enable them to continue to develop intelligibility, communicability, and confidence outside class as well as inside.

Figure 1. Four goals concerning pronunciation teaching. From “The Pronunciation Component in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages” by J. Morley, 1991, *Tesol Quarterly*, 25(3), p. 500. Copyright 1991 by TESOL.

These, in her opinion, should be the goals in which both teacher and student focus regarding pronunciation learning. In fact, she affirms that having these explicit goals and making the student aware of them helps the student in his/her learning process, even the youngest ones. In the case of very young students, she suggests that simple charts or diagrams could be used for this purpose. Zielinski & Yates (2014) also talk about another aim, which is “to develop learners’ awareness of the target pronunciation feature and how it differs from the feature in the L1” (p. 66), idea that can be related to the “awakening to languages” program (see section 3.2, p. 12, for more information on this program).

Morley (1991) also addresses the role of the teacher. She affirms that the teacher, when teaching pronunciation, should take a coaching role, which means encouraging the learners to achieve the goals and giving them support in how to reach the objectives. In this direction, Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin (1996) point out the issue that the teachers’ level of pronunciation, and their teaching resources and strategies, may suppose to the students’ learning. Moreover, Morely (1991) also talks about the atmosphere:

“In pronunciation/speech work, perhaps more than any other part of language study, a comfortable classroom atmosphere is essential for maximum achievement. Classroom interactions need to be enjoyable and supportive with a focus on strengths as well as weaknesses. The learning climate needs to be one where even the most retiring (and the most unintelligible) students can lose their self-consciousness and embarrassment about “sounding funny” as they work to modify pronunciation/speech features of their oral communication skill” (Morley, 1991, p. 504-505).

Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin (1996) affirm that teachers need to be aware of the factors that might affect our learners’ acquisition of the target language pronunciation and to which level, as well as to know which ones we can influence on and which ones are out of our control.

After exposing some of the ideas that some authors present upon pronunciation teaching, it is essential to take into account, as Morley (1991) states, that providing teachers with new pronunciation teaching practices is not enough. We also need to develop new methods to evaluate the learners regarding intelligibility and communicability, which we already saw are the goals we should embrace.

Finally, I would also like to point out Pinter (2006) and her research on pronunciation teaching, who talks about very young language learners.

“The advantages concern young children’s intuitive grasp of language and their ability to be more attuned to the phonological system of the new language. The consensus is that children are sensitive to the sounds and the rhythm of new languages and they enjoy copying new sounds and patterns of intonation” (p. 29).

Pinter (2006) discusses on the advantages and disadvantages of early language learning and specifically pronunciation teaching. She considers that an adult learner can compensate for almost everything but pronunciation. Therefore, it ought to be one of the main features to stress on, due to its more difficult achievement in adulthood. As we will see in further sections, phonological awareness is very crucial for achieving an intelligible pronunciation, although it is not the only nor the main benefit that this ability offers to the language learner.

3.2. Phonological awareness

3.2.1. The importance of phonological awareness

“Phonological awareness refers to the set of skills which enables us to analyze the sounds in words we say and hear” (Layton & Deeny, 2002, p. vii). Other authors have defined the concept of phonological awareness, and most of the definitions include two main ideas: the first one, that phonological awareness is an ability or skill; and the second one, that it involves an explicit analysis of language. Jiménez & Ortiz (2000), for example, state: “La conciencia fonológica se refiere a la toma de conciencia de cualquier unidad fonológica del lenguaje hablado” (p. 23). Another idea that many authors agree on is that “the very notion that spoken language is made up of sequences of these little sounds does not come naturally or easily to human beings” (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg & Beeler, 2004, p.1), which leads us to the idea that this ability has to be trained. Chard & Dickson (1999) remark that “phonological awareness is the understanding of different ways that oral language can be divided into smaller components and manipulated” (p. 262).

Many authors affirm that phonological awareness is key to the development and acquisition of reading abilities. For example, Layton & Deeny (2002) state that “phonological awareness is necessary for readers to make full use of the alphabetic principle which underpins our written language system” (p. 8). Other authors such as Font & Vilaró (2002) and Cuadro & Trías (2008) also point out the importance of phonological awareness for reading and spelling success. “An awareness of phonemes is necessary to grasp the alphabetic principle that underlies our system of written language” (Chard & Dickson, 1999, p. 263). Lourenço & Andrade (2014), two Portuguese researchers, carried out a study to determine the benefits of “awakening to languages” program, a program designed to help children to be aware of the similarities and differences between languages and to embrace the new language from an analytical perspective. In this study, they sustain that:

“Metalinguistic skills, specifically PA, are linked to successful reading, writing, and vocabulary learning, in both native and foreign languages, being a determining factor in educational and professional success. Therefore, we believe that it is important that an early years’ curriculum

includes activities centred on the exploration of linguistic and cultural diversity, in order to promote the development of skills indispensable for a lifelong learning of languages” (p. 315).

However, Font & Vilaró (2002) maintain in their article about phonological awareness that “la consciència fonològica facilita la lectura i és facilitada per la lectura. Aquesta relació recíproca significa que la consciència fonològica és important abans i durant l’aprenentatge de la lectura” (p. 137). Through this statement, they remind us that phonological awareness is not only something we, as teachers, should train our students on before the introduction of written language but also something we should keep in mind during and after the process of written language abilities.

Furthermore, Aliaga (1995), in her study with Catalan and Spanish adult English learners, found that phonological awareness training significantly increases the learners’ ability to discriminate the trained sounds, although learners do not reach a native-level of discrimination. She also found that learners’ ability to produce these sounds does not improve significantly. As previously mentioned, the age factor could be relevant in the difficulty to reach accuracy in the production of these sounds, but further research should be done to confirm it.

Many of the studies about phonological awareness are centered in phonological awareness in the first language, but there is not much research on whether phonological awareness plays an important role on the learning of a second or foreign language. However, Quiroga, Lemos-Britton, Mostafapour, Abbott & Berninger (2002), through their study on how phonological awareness training affected English reading in young Spanish speakers, found that “phonological awareness is related to learning to read English when one’s first language is Spanish and reading instruction is in English” (p. 98).

3.2.2. Phonological awareness training

Phonological awareness training is important not only because phonological awareness is important, but also because it is the only way to develop this ability, that is not innate. Moreover, “children who lack phonemic awareness can be identified, and many of them improve their phonemic awareness with instruction” (Chard & Dickson, 1999, p. 263). It seems like, in this case, instruction is a quite simple solution to the lack of this ability. However, how are we supposed to train phonological awareness in our students?

“It would appear necessary that it be daily practice for pre-primary teachers to include activities that promote PA and help bi/plurilingual children develop and transfer their metalinguistic skills in order to support future literacy acquisition and language learning” (Lourenço & Andrade, 2014, p. 307). Like them, many other authors support the phonological awareness training as

a way to prepare children for literacy. Some may think that phonological awareness teaching training is necessary for teachers to help their students, but Layton & Deeny (2002) sustain that phonological awareness teaching training is desirable but not indispensable, as all teachers can include PA in the pre-reading program in a way that they can support students without this specific training. However, Adams et al. (2004) are from the opinion that “in order to build phonemic awareness in all children, classroom teachers should know a little about the structure of language, especially phonology” (p. 3).

Adams et al. (2004), in their book, suggest that “many of the activities involving rhyme, rhythm, listening, and sounds that have long been enjoyed with preschool-age children are ideally suited” (p.1) for phonological awareness training, claiming as well that these activities will promote the development of phonological awareness more if the teacher is aware of this goal. This book provides the teachers with a phonemic awareness training program for preschool-age children. The program presented in the book guides the child through a process from listening games to phoneme awareness and the beginning of spelling, moving progressively from syllables to single sounds, which makes it a useful resource for teachers who want to introduce phonological awareness in their teaching program. Chard & Dickson (1999) suggest that “activities like substituting different sounds for the first sound of a familiar song can help children develop phonological awareness” (p. 261). They also recommend having a clear idea of how this ability develops in children, where to start and how to follow the training, and using materials that can help children “see” the language and be more conscious about it, such as puppets or cards. Let us not forget that we are talking about very young children, and when planning for this age group there is a component that cannot be forgotten, fun. As Chard & Dickson (1999) mention in their article, “instruction in phonological awareness can be fun, engaging, and age appropriate, but the picture is not as simple as it seems” (p. 263), so it is the teacher’s responsibility to find the way to achieve these goals.

Many authors, such as Cuadro & Trías (2008), state that the key to promoting phonological awareness in the students is to provide them with activities which help them reflect upon the language and its different units. Layton & Deeny (2002) provide the readers with some strategies or activities that can help the teachers promote PA in their students: “Nursery rhymes, as well as other jingles and word-games, act as a trigger for raising phonological awareness to an explicit level” (p. 11). They as well give the teachers some linguistic tips that can also be beneficial for the children, for example, the “need to minimise the “schwa” sound: /cccc/ rather than “cuh””(p. 13).

As previously mentioned, it is difficult to find strategies on phonological awareness in foreign language learning, but there is one statement that is worth thinking about: “Coupling phonological awareness in the second language with phonological awareness in the first

language may be beneficial” (Quiroga et al., 2002, p. 99). Following this idea, Lourenço & Andrade (2014) found through their study that the “awakening to languages” (AtL) program contributes to improving phonological awareness (identification and manipulation of sounds) in the children’s mother tongue. Moreover, they found that this program was especially beneficial for children with another mother tongue, as it involved more than one language. Therefore, we could think that this program might be useful for increasing the phonological awareness in a foreign language, and even better for Catalan students, as they are in a bilingual context. They describe AtL program as a tool that provides children with the opportunity to see “language and units of speech as objects they can observe, think about and act upon, which contributes to the development of their PA and promotes reflection-based skills in relation to languages, provided there is adequate and systematic exposure” (Lourenço & Andrade, 2014, p. 315).

3.3. Assessing phonological awareness

Chard & Dickson (1999) identify two main purposes for phonological awareness assessment: “to initially identify students who appear to be at risk for difficulty in acquiring beginning reading skills and to regularly monitor the progress of students who are receiving instruction in phonological awareness” (p. 265).

When talking about classroom assessment or progress monitoring, Chard & Dickson (1999) state that a baseline for each student must be set, because what we want to assess is not their level according to some test, but rather their progress and improvement, so we need to keep track of their strengths and weaknesses in order to adjust the PA instruction to the student’s needs.

Chard & Dickson (1999) present several testing resources that can help teachers screen and monitor progress. Most of them are used for screening (identifying high and low performers) and designed for children in the last years of Kindergarten:

- **Test of phonological awareness.** This test predicts segmenting and expects children to match or discriminate initial sounds.
- **Yopp-Singer Test of Phoneme Segmentation.** This test can also be administered in 1st grade. It requires children to spell the sounds of the words. A particular characteristic is that the evaluator gives feedback to the child on his/her performance. Moreover, the evaluator also writes down the error. Keeping track of the exact error and not only of the number of correct answers is interesting as it helps the teacher adjust better the intervention.

- **Bruce Test of Phoneme Deletion.** The objective of this test is to analyze the ability of children to produce a familiar word without one of the phonemes that form it.
- **Auditory Analysis Test.** Similar to the Bruce Test, the aim is to measure the ability to delete. In this case though, the difficulty increases from deleting syllables to deleting single phonemes, in both cases with different difficulties depending on the position of the syllable or phoneme to be deleted.
- **Phoneme Segmentation Fluency, DIBELS.** This test can also be administered in 1st grade. This test allows the teacher to screen but also to monitor progress, as students do not have to answer 100% correctly to score points. Therefore, it is very sensitive to progress. The structure is similar to the Yopp-Singer Test, although students do not get feedback on their answers.

McGee (2007), discusses on PA classroom assessment. She suggests using some of the test's exercises to keep track of the learners' progress, as well as adapting some of them and turning them into regular simple activities such as asking students to think of words that rhyme with a word given or asking them to say the first or last phoneme of a word. Those exercises or language games could be done during daily routines such as snack time, or even during transitions, so that the pressure is taken out of them and children can find joy in playing with language.

After considering several tests I realized that none of them were thought for English as a Foreign Language. Therefore, I decided to, based on the research upon Catalan very young EFL learners and their main difficulties and taking into account the type of exercises of the already existent PA tests.

4. Study

4.1. Research objectives

1. To research upon the importance of phonological awareness in first language learning and the benefits of its training.
2. To develop and apply a phonological awareness test that can assess the phonological awareness of Catalan 5-year-olds learning English as a Foreign Language.
3. To analyze and interpret the professionals' (Pre-school teachers and English teachers) opinion on the current situation of EFL learning in Catalonia and the role of phonological awareness in it.
4. To conclude the importance and the role of phonological awareness in EFL very young learners.

4.2. Contextualization of the school

The school where I did the practical part of the dissertation is Vedruna Berga school. This semi-private school is located in Berga, a town in the middle of Catalonia. Vedruna Berga is part of the Escola Nova 21 project, a project designed to provide schools with the support they need during a year to make a change in their methodologies and resources. The main objective is to adjust the education to the child and its environment so that the education he/she gets helps him develop into becoming a capable and critical citizen of the world. This fact is important because it shows the aim of the school for changing, their openness to learning and improving the education they offer.

One of the biggest changes that the school has experienced recently is the use of “environments” as the methodology for the afternoons. The regular classrooms are turned into several environments in which children can learn autonomously with the help and guidance of the reference adult. This type of learning empowers the learner and makes him/her leader of his/her own learning process. Children can choose the environment they want to be each day if there is room available. At the end of the afternoon, the teacher asks the children what they have learned, if they have enjoyed, if something new or special happened, etc. The objective of this conversation is to make thinking visible, to help children think about the experiences they have had and take the learning out of it.

Another important change that was made some years ago is the introduction of the conversation assistant. The conversation assistant is a native speaker that works in the school

and gives support to the English teachers. She is never a substitute of the English teacher. Therefore, during the English lessons, there are two adults in the classroom: the English teacher and the conversation assistant. Moreover, the conversation assistant is also talking to the children during recess and spends some time with them in the environment. The objective is that English becomes a language with a communicative purpose more than a subject. The conversation assistant works with children from P4 to 6th grade.

Finally, they also made a change regarding English in preschool. In preschool, children have English for 1 hour each week. It used to be a whole hour once a week, but they changed it into three periods of 20 minutes. This is better for two reasons. The first one, because frequency is essential. Secondly, because very young children cannot hold the attention for longer than 15-20 minutes, so spending 1 whole hour doing the same is a waste of time. Children feel like they have more contact with the English language, and this helps build the expected relationship between the children and the language.

4.3. Participants

This research was carried out with 18 students.

The students for the PA test were selected based on several criteria:

- **Age.** All the students had to be in the last year of preschool education within the regular generation, that is, children born in 2012. The reason is that both the age and the course are considered determining factors.
- **Speakers of only Catalan at home.** I wanted to identify the main difficulties that Catalan children may have within the perception and production of English sounds, so it was important that the participants of the study did not have a determining influence of the Spanish sound system.
- **English at school only.** The way schools teach English is also an object of research, so I also wanted to reduce the impact that afterschool lessons could have had on students. Therefore, I included in the study only those students who do not take English lessons outside the school.

After this selection process, out of the approximately 40 students in the last year of preschool, I realized the study with 18.

The gender or their preference for or opinion on the English language were not considered to be factors that needed to be taken into account.

4.4. Methodology and tools

4.4.1. Phonological awareness test

After researching on PA assessment and seeing several PA tests, I decided that I needed to design a PA test that analyzed exactly what I wanted to know and that was adequate for the group of participants selected for the study (taking into account both their PA in Catalan and their contact with the English language). The test I designed consisted of 3 exercises: sound production, sound discrimination and rhyme identification. The test was realized individually to the 18 students selected. The student was asked to sit at a table with the evaluator and the native speaker. Before starting each exercise, the evaluator explained the dynamics to the student and then set some examples in Catalan in order to make sure that the student proved to have that PA ability in his/her mother tongue.

1. **Sound production.** One word for each of the sounds in the English sound system was selected. The evaluator asked the student to repeat one by one the words that the native speaker pronounced. Only the target sound in each word was evaluated. For example, for the sound /i:/, the word “read” was selected. Therefore, when the student pronounced this word, the evaluator only cared if the sound /i:/ was well pronounced, even though the student might pronounce the /r/ or the /d/ wrongly.
2. **Sound discrimination.** 12 pairs of similar sounds were selected. For each pair, 2 words that differ only in those sounds were chosen. The evaluator showed the student cards with 2 pictures. After the native speaker pronounced both words, the evaluator asked the student to decide whether the two words sounded exactly the same or slightly different. The pairs of words were:
 - Pool – pull
 - Sheep – ship
 - Cat – cut
 - Hurt – heart
 - Caught – cot
 - Pig – pick
 - Dock – dog
 - Mop – mob
 - Bet – bed
 - Vowel – bowel
 - Three – free
 - Day - they

3. **Rhyme identification.** The pairs of rhyming words were made with the 8 English diphthongs. The evaluator showed the student cards with 2 pictures. After the native speaker pronounced both words, the evaluator asked the student to decide whether the two words rhymed or not.

- Disappear – beer
- Tambour – mature
- Millionaire – hair
- Pray – freeway
- Schoolboy – toy
- Eye – butterfly
- Snow – mosquito
- Eyebrow - cow

The exact material used for the test can be seen in Appendix 1 (p. 35).

4.4.2. Focus group

After realizing the PA test and analyzing the Catalan educational curriculum (the analysis can be found in this document, p. 27), I organized a focus group with some specialists. A focus group is a conversation during which some specialists discuss on some topics brought by the leader. In this case, I decided to invite three people to this focus group: the two teachers of the participants of the study (P5) and the English teacher for 1st and 2nd grades. I wanted to have the P5 teachers because they are the ones who are in contact with the children daily. Moreover, they are the Catalan teachers, so they are very familiar with the process of acquiring a language and the concept of PA and how to help children develop this ability. The reason why I invited the 1st and 2nd grade English teacher is that I wanted to have the perspective from the future. He knows what he teaches to children, what he expects them to know, what they lack and what they need to succeed in the process of learning English. More importantly, he knows the abilities that children need to have developed before starting 1st grade.

The structure of the focus group was the following:

1. **Presentation.** I explained what the study was about, which were my research objectives and what were the expectations of the focus group.
2. **Phonological awareness.** I gave them a document (Appendice 2, p. 58) with some ideas on PA as an introduction to the topic. I asked them to discuss on it and share their knowledge and opinion on PA. Some of the questions I asked, for instance, are:

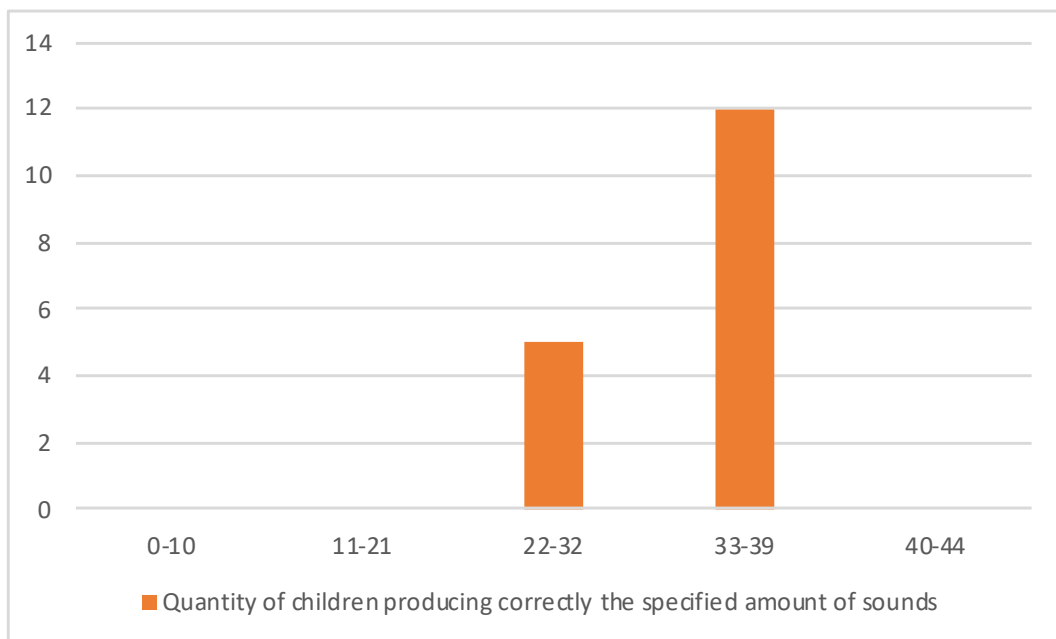
what role do you think that PA has in the process of learning Catalan? And in the process of learning English?

3. **Catalan educational curriculum.** The second document we talked about was the analysis of the Catalan educational curriculum. We talked about their interpretations of the information given and their point of view as teachers. I asked them what path they think would be the most appropriate one to choose regarding all the information in the curriculum.
4. **PA test results.** After showing them the PA test results, I mainly expected their reactions. What surprised them and what did not. I also wanted to know what role they think the English teaching in Catalonia has on the development of PA in children.
5. **Final reflection.** Finally, I asked them a quite direct question and observed their reactions. The question was: What would you think of applying the linguistic game and the observation and analysis of the oral language we do within the Catalan language to the learning of the English language before introducing the written language? This was, from the beginning, the most important question I had. Of course, all the process was necessary in order to reach this.

4.5. Results

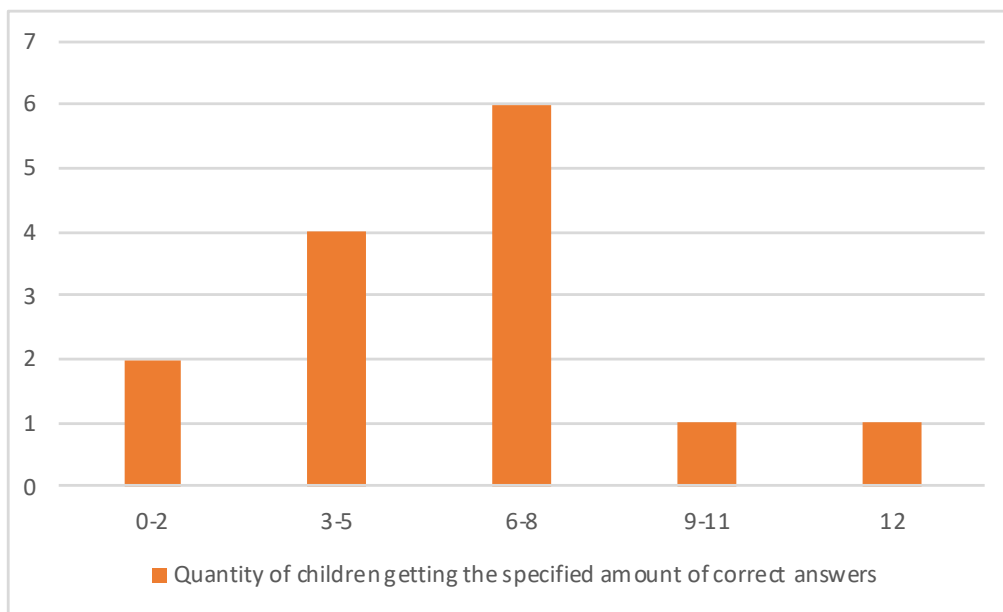
4.5.1. Phonological awareness test results

Exercise 1:

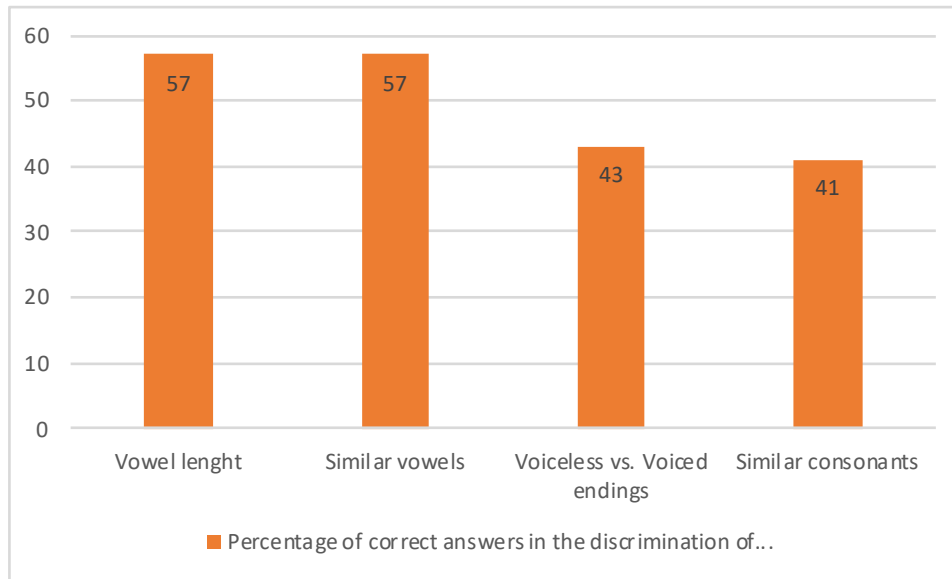


In this graphic we can observe that all children can produce at least half of the sounds in the English sound system correctly. However, none of them can produce more than a 90% of the sounds. Further research should be done in order to analyse if the reason why they cannot produce some of the sounds is due to a lack of training to hear them or a lack of training to use the right muscles to produce them.

Exercise 2: 14 of the 17 children are considered valid in this exercise, as 3 of them did not show to have this ability in Catalan.

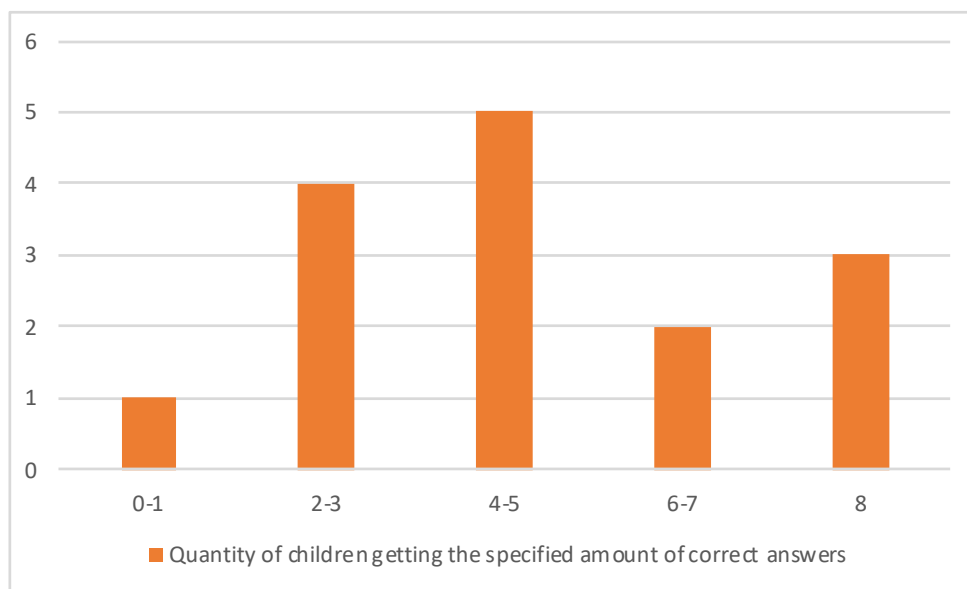


We can observe almost half of the children cannot distinguish more than half of the pairs of words. Most of the other half of children distinguish between 6 and 8 pairs of words. There is only 1 child who can correctly distinguish all the pairs of words. It is important to say that most of the children who are not capable of distinguishing between two words are not able to produce the target sounds of these words either.



The exercise consisted of 3 pairs focused on vowel length, 2 pairs focused on similar vowels, 4 pairs focused on voiceless vs. voiced endings and 3 pairs focused on similar consonants. This graphic shows us that although there is not a significant difference, children find it easier to discriminate vowel sounds than consonant sounds. I find it worth mentioning that only 3 children out of 14 were able to discriminate “free” from “three”.

Exercise 3: 15 of the 17 children are considered valid in this exercise, as 2 of them did not show to have this ability in Catalan.



In this case, 1/3 of the children were capable to identify only less than half of the rhymes. The rest could identify half of the rhymes or more. 3 children were able to identify all the rhymes. No relation between the ability to produce these diphthongs and the ability to identify the rhymes has been found. There is not a significant difference in the identification of all the rhymes.

4.5.2. Analysis of the Catalan Primary Education Curriculum

Learning a foreign Language is not compulsory in Catalonia until the beginning of Primary Education and, therefore, it is not included in the Preschool Education curriculum. This fact is very important, because it means that no previous knowledge of any foreign language should be required or necessary to succeed in Primary Education. However, that is not the reality in most schools in Catalonia. Most of them start teaching English in Preschool Education, but as the content or the competences are not described in the curriculum, English lessons can differ a lot from one school to another.

We can all agree that Preschool Education is a period of time in which children, among many other abilities, develop exponentially their abilities in oral language in their mother tongue. Then, if the Catalan Primary Education Curriculum states that “per formar parlants plurilingües i interculturals cal, en primer lloc, l’assoliment de la competència plena en català” (Departament d’Ensenyament, 2017, p. 26), why do schools start teaching English before establishing the foundations in Catalan? And, moreover, why do schools start teaching written English at the same time when children are still developing writing abilities in Catalan?

“Saber escoltar i parlar bé són habilitats imprescindibles [...]. En el cas de les llengües estrangeres, el domini d’aquesta dimensió vertebrava la resta de dimensions” (Departament d’Ensenyament, 2017, p.33). This statement makes the intentions clear: oral language comes first; children need to have had a lot of oral input before they are exposed to the written language. It seems like a logic idea, and relatively easy to achieve, but then, something breaks our schemes: the written language is introduced in the first 2 years of Primary Education. If we do not want to forget the previously mentioned principle that oral language comes first (which, taking into account several studies, we should not forget), we find ourselves in a one-way road: we have to highly expose our students to English in Preschool Education.

Furthermore, we have to not only expose our students to good English (the need of a good language model is mentioned in the methodological guidelines), but we also have to help our students learn the sound system of the target language, as it says in the curriculum: “L’expressió oral en llengües estrangeres implica el coneixement [...] d’uns elements fonètics que contribueixen a la fluïdesa de la parla” (Departament d’Ensenyament, 2017, p.33). This is the first and only mention to phonological awareness present in the Catalan Primary Education Curriculum. Pronunciation is, therefore, a feature present in the contents and the evaluation criteria from 3rd to 6th grade of Primary Education. Is that the reality of the English subject in Catalan schools? Besides, one thing that concerns me is: Why is pronunciation not a content or an evaluation criterion in earlier stages if the curriculum states that oral language is the foundation to other language abilities?

4.5.3. Focus group results

The fact that the three teachers were talking about the system and the way Catalan schools teach English in general and not about their own methodology made it easier for them to open and really express their opinion. As mentioned in the section 4.4.3, the focus group was around three different documents: quotes regarding PA, analysis of the Catalan educational curriculum, and PA test results.

R, one of the teachers in P5 (R from now on), mentions that the process of learning to read and write begins with the knowledge of the sound and its written form, and to achieve this, children need to work a lot on the word and the pronunciation. When I mention PA in the learning of the English language the English teacher (E from now on) affirms that in English, beginning to speak is difficult, but when they introduce the written language is when they start having more difficulties. This fact is probably due to a lack of PA. He also points out the methodology they use when introducing the written language. He lets the students write in English however they would write the sounds they hear. This strategy helps the learner integrate the sound and with time, by seeing the written form many times, learn the normative way to write the word. He agrees that this also helps the teacher see if the student perceives the sounds of the words with accuracy.

Talking about the abilities that children have and need in 1st grade, they all agree that a child who does not know any English cannot be successful in English in 1st grade. This is something to worry about because it generates a social pressure that leads families to force their children to study English when they are very young. That is when E remarks the difficulty he has in 1st grade, which is that there are many different levels and he has to attend all of them, so it is difficult to know when to introduce new things or abilities. Therefore, it is expected that children have a solid base of the English language when they start Primary education, but this makes the Preschool stage responsible for something that is not of their competence.

After taking a look at the analysis of the Catalan educational curriculum, I encourage them to share their opinion. E remarks the contradiction, because the curriculum says that you must to achieve a basic level in the first language before learning another language, but increasing the amount of English hours to ensure the development of the orality before the introduction of the written language implies undoubtedly a reduction of the amount of Catalan hours, which directly leads to a decrease in the students' abilities in Catalan. R contributes to this idea by adding that it is contradictory because it implies that children need to have worked on the English oral language much before beginning Primary education but, parallelly, the English language is not considered in the Preschool educational curriculum.

When I show them the results of the PA test, I can see that they are not as comfortable talking about it as it implies talking about their work as teachers. However, I want to call attention to something that R states, which is that children dominate these types of exercises in Catalan because they are used to practice them, but in English it is not something they generally do, so they cannot associate these exercises to anything they have ever lived during the English sessions. She agrees that PA is an ability that needs to be trained and that will not be developed if it is not promoted.

Finally, I ask them the question: What would you think of applying the linguistic game and the observation and analysis of the oral language we do within the Catalan language to the learning of the English language before introducing the written language? Instantly, E agrees that it would be much better. However, R specifies that this should be regulated. She thinks that if PA in English needs to be promoted during Preschool education, the Preschool educational curriculum should contemplate it. When we hypothesize about regulating English in Preschool education, we talk about the role of the English Preschool teacher. Nowadays, the reality in most schools is that English teachers in Preschool are either Preschool teachers or English specialists, but it is challenging to find a Preschool teacher who is specialist in English. This fact is a handicap because it is complex to find a person who knows about the learning process of very young English as a Foreign Language learners.

After that, we hypothesize about introducing the written language later on. E agrees that it would be appropriate, but then hesitates about how the content should be redistributed. When I ask him his opinion on more freedom to distribute the content in the whole Primary stage, he thinks that it is difficult to make it easy for everyone. He would like the freedom because he would be able to spend the first years promoting PA and integrating the oral language and then the learning of the written language would happen faster because the fundamentals would be more solid.

The whole transcription in Catalan of the focus group is in Appendix 3 (p. 60).

4.6. Analysis and discussion

The design of the phonological awareness test was, undoubtedly, the base of the whole project. As seen in the theoretical framework, all the PA test found and analyzed are thought for preschoolers or first-graders who are native speakers of English. Therefore, none of them was useful for this research. Obviously, all of them were taken into account to design the final test, which results were used as a new tool for the focus group. In this case, it was considered to be interesting that the several tools would appear to be consequent rather than parallel, as this way the project would develop better. This is the reason why the PA test was the first thing to be done, followed by the analysis of the Catalan education curriculums. The results of both practices were used during the focus group as topics to discuss. Moreover, the PA test results are also considered as proof that transition from PA in the first language to PA in the foreign language is not reliable and cannot be contemplated as enough for the adequate acquisition of the foreign language.

Taking into account the several research discussed in the theoretical framework as well as the analysis of the Catalan Primary education curriculum and the teaching experts statements, let me present this discussion as a journey through some hypotheses on when and how English as a Foreign Language should be introduced in the Catalan Primary education context, and what role should phonological awareness play in all this process.

One of the most discussed issues around English as a Foreign Language is when to start. The Catalan Primary education curriculum indicates that English teaching should start once students have a full competence within Catalan. As the English teacher claims during the focus group, this does not happen at the same time for all children and it clearly does not even happen in 1st grade. Let us imagine, however, that we decided to start teaching English in 1st grade. Theoretically, we ought to follow the curriculum, which states that written English has to be introduced in the first cycle of Primary education, which is 1st and 2nd grade. This, respects the principle specified earlier to have a “full” competence in Catalan, but it forgets to consider the many theories that phonological awareness is an essential base for literacy. Phonological awareness provides the learner with the resources he/she needs to fully develop the linguistic abilities related to the written language, as Layton & Deeny (2002) and Chard & Dickson (1999) declare in their studies.

For Catalan teachers it is clear that the process of learning to read and write begins with the knowledge of the sound and its written form, and to achieve this, children need to work a lot on the word and the pronunciation. This PA training is hardly mentioned in the Catalan Primary education curriculum, and it is also difficult to see in daily practices. In fact, the English teacher affirms that oral English represents a challenge for learners, but the biggest challenge is the

introduction of the written language. It is probably that big of a challenge due to a lack of previous phonological awareness training. What makes us think that PA is important in the first language but not so much when we talk about foreign languages? Lourenço & Andrade (2014) point out that PA is related to literacy abilities development in both native and foreign languages. Regarding all these ideas, we move on to the second hypothesis: start teaching English in 1st grade but just orally (giving importance to PA) and start teaching written English later on. Nowadays, the curriculum does not allow teachers to do this, but let us theorize about it. The English teacher follows a methodology that seems to be adequate for introducing the written language: he asks the students to begin writing English however they would write the sounds they hear. This strategy is useful for the learner to integrate the sounds and for the teacher to monitor progress and “assess” the level of phonological awareness of children as well as their ability to perceive the sounds accurately. Moreover, it is supported by Font & Vilaró (2002), who claim that phonological awareness is important both before and during reading and writing learning, and by Quiroga et al. (2002), who determined the importance of PA for Spanish speakers learning to read in English. The English teacher also agrees that freedom for schools to decide how to organize the whole Primary education English teaching would be useful (having, of course, the outcomes for 6th grade stipulated), as he could spend the first years focusing on oral language and then the introduction of literacy would not represent as much of a challenge and the acquisition would be faster for learners.

Nevertheless, as I have just mentioned, this is not viable in Catalan schools for now. The third hypothesis, which is actually the closest to the reality, is to start teaching English in preschool. Furthermore, there is some research that shows us this is not a bad idea. Pinter (2006) states that young learners have some advantages that adult learners do not have within pronunciation. They are more fearless and sensitive to the pronunciation features. She also warns that it is hard for adult learners to compensate for pronunciation. Consequently, taking into account just the pronunciation feature of the language, starting earlier is better (not faster). Some other authors also defend the idea of an early start when it comes to pronunciation and phonological awareness training. Quiroga et al. (2002) and Lourenço & Andrade (2014) found in their researches that PA in the second or foreign language and PA in the first language can complement each other if they are both trained and promoted, and doing it at the same time can be beneficial for the child, not only in terms of the development of both PA in the first language and PA in the foreign language, but also in the development of interlanguage and metalinguistic skills. In this direction, Zielinski & Yates (2014) suggest that it would appear interesting that learners could be aware of the pronunciation features of the language they are learning and how these features are different from their own language's.

As one of the P5 teachers mentions, children dominate phonological awareness in Catalan because they are used to practice these type of exercises, but in English they cannot associate the exercise to anything they have experienced. The results of the PA test show that those children can more or less solve the exercise and that they do not lack the abilities tested but they do not dominate them either. As we know that those children have been trained in phonological awareness in Catalan, it is possible that they can transfer some of the abilities they have in PA in Catalan, but we cannot say they have PA in English because their performance in the test exercises is much lower than in Catalan. This is proof that phonological awareness is an ability that needs to be trained. The P5 teacher agrees that PA is an ability that needs to be trained and that will not be developed if it is not promoted, as some authors state in their research. For example, Adams et al. (2004) indicate that “the very notion that spoken language is made up of sequences of these little sounds does not come naturally or easily to human beings” (p. 1). Aliaga (1995) found in her study that PA training significantly increased the learners’ ability to discriminate the trained sounds. This should be reason enough to include this instruction during the first years of English learning. But let us not forget that we are talking about preschool children. “Instruction in phonological awareness can be fun, engaging and age appropriate” (Chard & Dickson, 1999, p. 263). The Catalan Primary education curriculum indirectly implies that children need to have been highly exposed to English during preschool, and this is also the feeling of the three teachers. However, it is important to know what kind of activities we can carry out with this age group. Adams et al. (2004) and Layton & Deeny (2002) suggest us using traditional language games and activities involving rhymes, jingles, songs or word-games to promote phonological awareness. Activities of this kind help teachers reach that balance between explicit language analysis and funny age-appropriate activities. Lourenço & Andrade (2014) also offer a program that triggers PA in both native and non-native children. This program is called “awakening to languages” and it promotes interlanguage and metalinguistic skills, but they warn that adequate and systematic exposure is an essential requirement.

It has been slightly mentioned throughout this discussion, but the role of the teacher is something that needs to be specifically addressed. The Catalan Primary education curriculum explicates in the methodological guidelines the need of a good language model. This is, surprisingly, the least mentioned idea within the research, probably because it is too obvious, and researchers feel like it should not be necessary to claim it. However, they do demand for teachers who take a coaching role (Morley, 1991), encouraging children, helping them achieve their goals and creating an inviting environment. Adams et al. (2004) also state that knowledge about phonology is necessary for English teachers who are willing to train their students in phonological awareness. Layton & Deeny, however, are from the opinion that training for

teachers is not indispensable, although they give some tips to teachers, such as the “need to minimize the “schwa” sound: /cccc/ rather than “cuh”” (p. 13). Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin point out the role of the teacher as identifier of the factors that might affect our learners’ acquisition of the target language pronunciation. Nonetheless, finding a teacher with all these characteristics is not easy, as the English teacher claims during the focus group. For him, it is essential to find professionals who are experts in both preschool children and in teaching English as a Foreign Language.

We have seen all the benefits that phonological awareness has on literacy abilities acquisition, but we cannot forget the pronunciation component. Zielinski & Yates (2014) make it clear that we cannot think any more of pronunciation as something that we can fix once we already know English. The Catalan Primary education curriculum says that oral language implies the knowledge of the target language’s phonology, which contributes to fluidity. This is also the main objective that Morley (1991) points out when says that “within communicative activities, specific attention is given to stabilizing a student’s emerging abilities to adjust vowel and consonant pronunciation [...] to express intended meaning, and to increase intelligibility” (p. 498). But, if we agreed that the focus during the first years of English as a Foreign Language learning should be on oral language, why is pronunciation not present as a content nor as an evaluation criterion until 3rd grade in the Catalan Primary education curriculum?

During the focus group, the teachers claim in two different occasions this lack of regulation of the English language in Preschool education, as this educational stage is carrying a responsibility that is not defined in their curriculum. Consequently, and going back to our hypotheses, probably the most adequate one for Catalan children learning English, taking into account all the information presented, is to design a regulated and well-thought English program in Preschool education based on oral language, pronunciation and phonological awareness, with professionals who can cover all the students’ needs.

6. Conclusions

This research was thought to be an initial contact with phonological awareness in EFL very young learners. The direction of the study changed, but the main idea always remained the same. Phonological awareness is important, and we should not only find a place for its instruction in the EFL teaching program but even base this program on it. Therefore, the study was based on proving this idea. Research shows that PA is key in the development of the first language, and this research is the fundamentals on which I based my study. If PA is so important for learning the first language, how can it not be important for learning a foreign language?

Determining its importance was not easy, as it is something hardly measurable and it has not been studied much within this age group. Designing the phonological awareness test was key in order to have a clear idea of the student's level of PA. The main conclusion that can be extracted from the results of this test is that the students' average performance is probably a result of the lack of PA instruction. It is also possible that the tested students were able to transfer the PA abilities they have in their mother tongue in order to succeed in some exercises, although the fact that there are some sounds in English that are not present in the Catalan sound system made it impossible for the vast majority of them to fully succeed in the tasks.

English as a Foreign Language is widely present in the Catalan education system, even before it is regulated. As we have seen in the results of the focus group (p. 25), almost every school starts teaching English during Preschool education, and even some nurseries introduce this foreign language to their very young students. This lack of regulation during the first years of EFL instruction results in a difficulty for teachers and schools to know what and how to teach, and usually PA is not part of the equation. Consequently, I needed to discuss this issue with professionals. Indirectly, by analyzing the Catalan Primary education curriculum and, later on, directly, during the focus group carried out with preschool and English teachers. I used the results of the PA test in order to show them the current situation of the students that will begin Primary education next year. Surprisingly, however, the results were not an issue that worried them. This leads me to think that before thinking on how to introduce PA in the EFL teaching program, the professionals that work with this age group and especially the English specialists need to be aware of its importance and why PA should be the base of EFL during the first years of learning.

The results of the focus group carried out with the three professionals show that while they agree that phonological awareness is important for the acquisition of a language, either the first language or a foreign language, they do not see clearly how this ability should be

integrated within the actual education curriculum. They perceive it more as an interesting idea that would probably be positive for the students rather than something really necessary for their linguistic development. However, we could state that the importance of PA for EFL very young learners was determined through this study.

Once its importance has been determined, it would be interesting to analyze when and how this instruction could and should be implemented in schools, as well as the specific benefits it would have on the children's acquisition of the language. It could be interesting for schools to use the phonological awareness test designed for this study to determine the PA level of their students, as well as their strengths and weaknesses regarding this ability, so that the PA training program could be adequate to the students' needs.

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8. Appendices

8.1. Appendix 1: Phonological awareness test

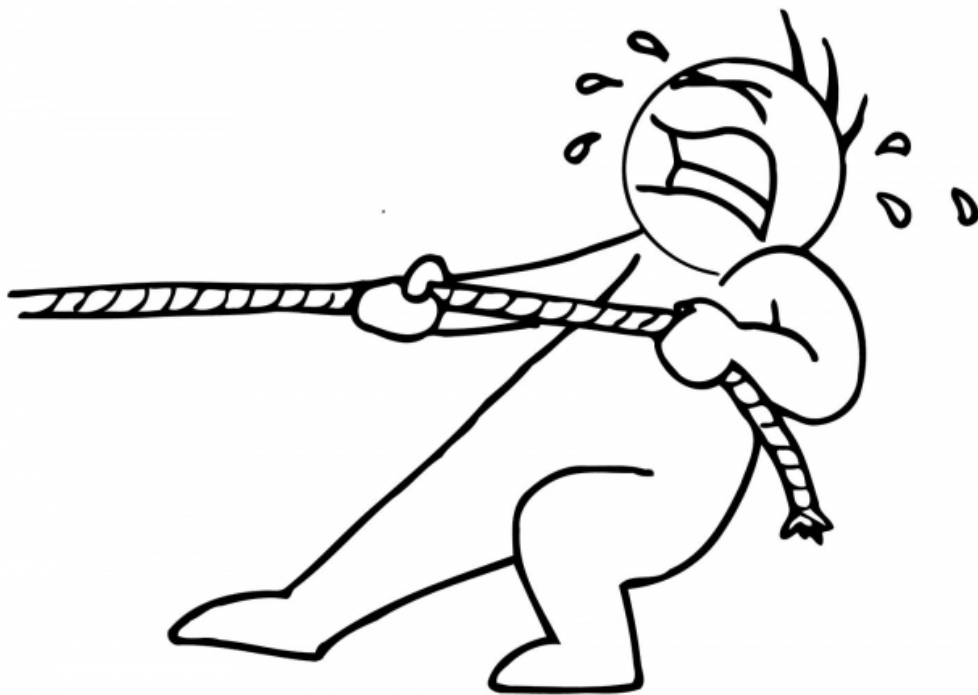
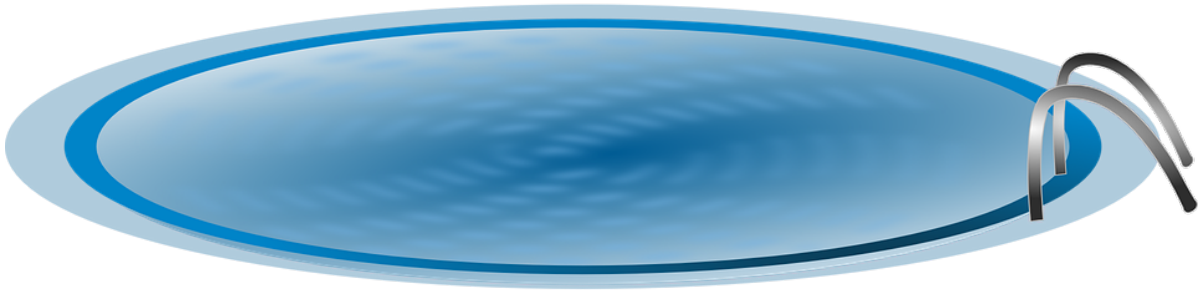
EXERCISE 1: SOUND PRODUCTION	
The native speaker produces the words below one by one and the evaluator asks the student to repeat each one of them. Only the target sound in each word is evaluated.	
VOWEL SOUNDS	CONSONANT SOUNDS
/ɪ:/ → read	/p/ → pen
/ɪ/ → pink	/b/ → bed
/u:/ → too	/v/ → very
/u/ → book	/t/ → time
/e/ → men	/d/ → do
/ə/ → coma	/tʃ/ → church
/ɜ:/ → bird	/dʒ/ → judge
/o:/ → sort	/k/ → kilo
/æ/ → mad	/g/ → go
/ʌ/ → cut	/f/ → five
/ɑ:/ → part	/θ/ → thin
/ɒ/ → not	/ð/ → the
/ɪə/ → here	/s/ → six
/eɪ/ → day	/z/ → zoo
/uə/ → tour	/ʃ/ → shock
/ɔɪ/ → boy	/ʒ/ → measure
/əʊ/ → no	/m/ → milk
/eə/ → pear	/n/ → name
/aɪ/ → my	/ŋ/ → sing
/aʊ/ → cow	/h/ → hello
	/l/ → like
	/r/ → read
	/w/ → when
	/j/ → yes

EXERCISE 2: SOUND DISCRIMINATION

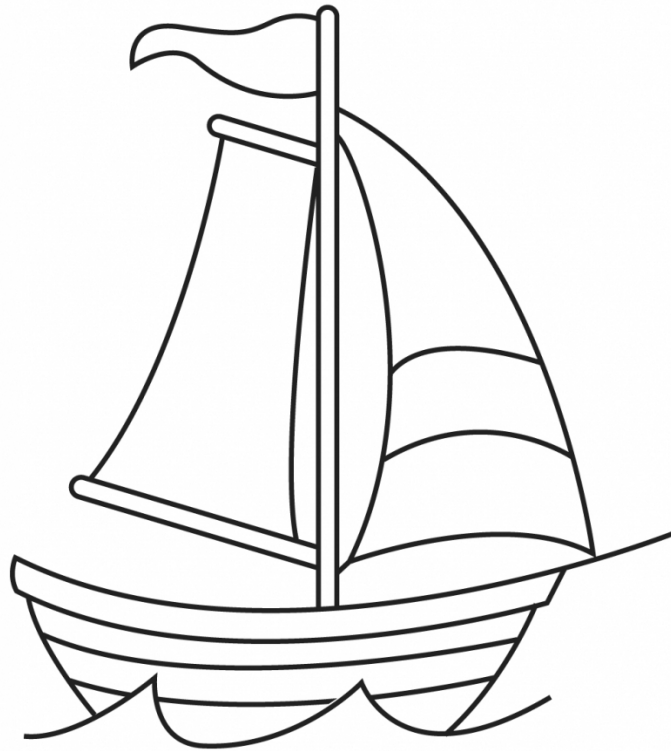
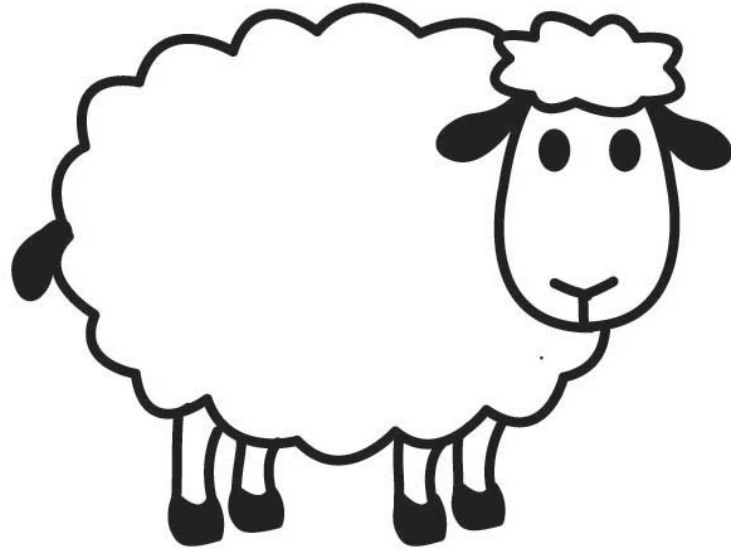
The native speaker pronounces the 2 words and the evaluator asks the student to decide whether these words sound the same or not.

1	Pool /pu:l/ → Pull /pul/
2	Sheep /ʃi:p/ → Ship /ʃɪp/
3	Cat /kæt/ → Cut /kʌt/
4	Hurt /hɜ:rt/ → Heart /hɑ:rt/
5	Caught /co:t/ → Cot /cɒt/
6	Pig /pɪg/ → Pick /pɪk/
7	Dock /dɒk/ → Dog /dɒg/
8	Mop /mɒp/ → Mob /mɒb/
9	Bet /bet/ → Bed /bed/
10	Vowel /'vauəl/ → Bowel /'bauəl/
11	Three /θri:/ → free /fri:/
12	Day /deɪ/ → they /ðeɪ/

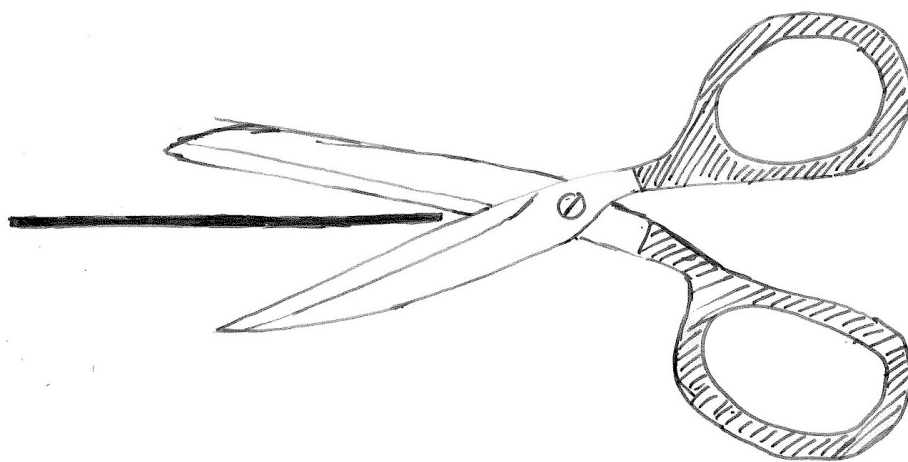
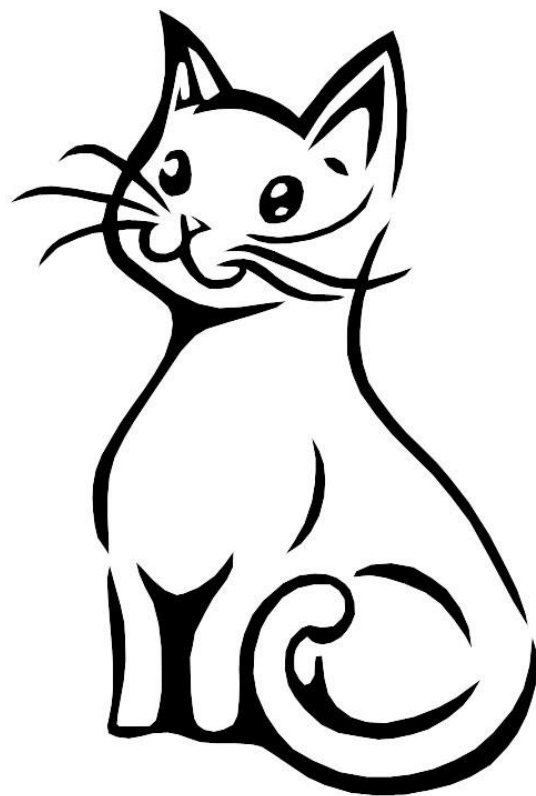
1.



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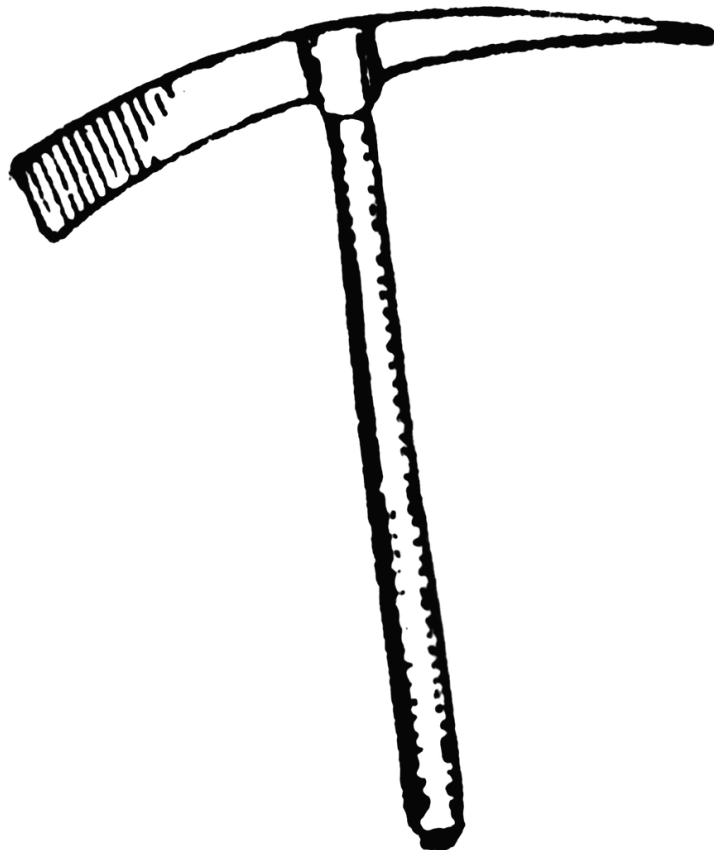
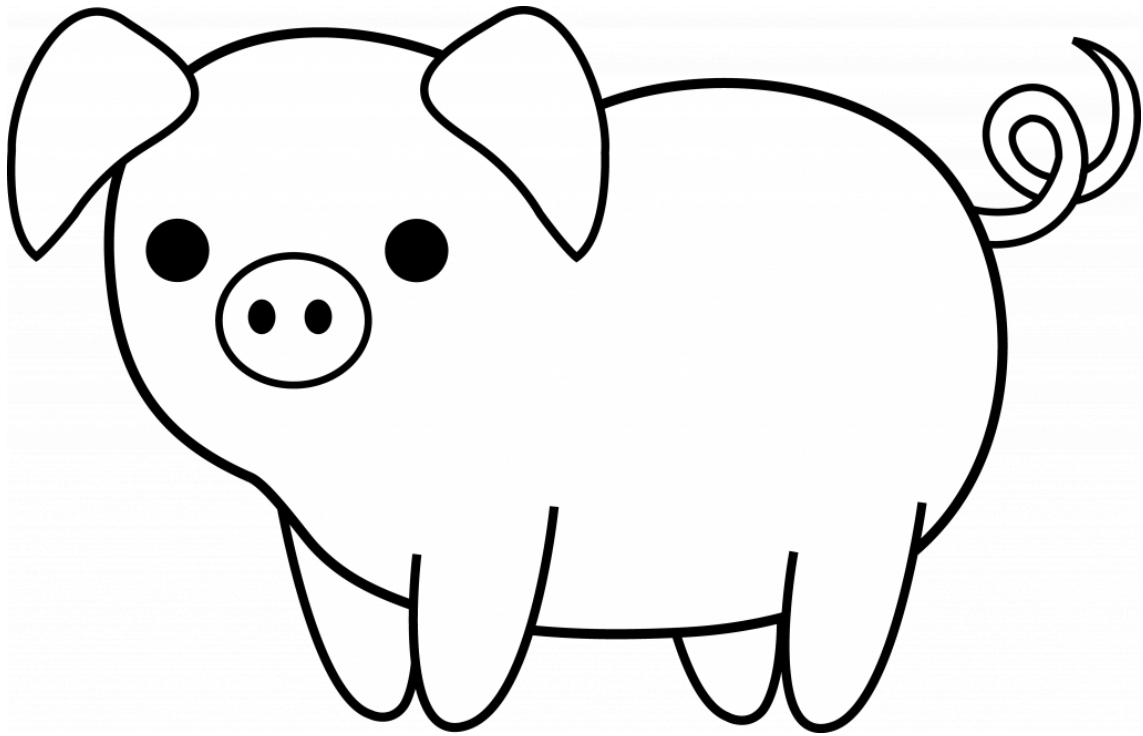
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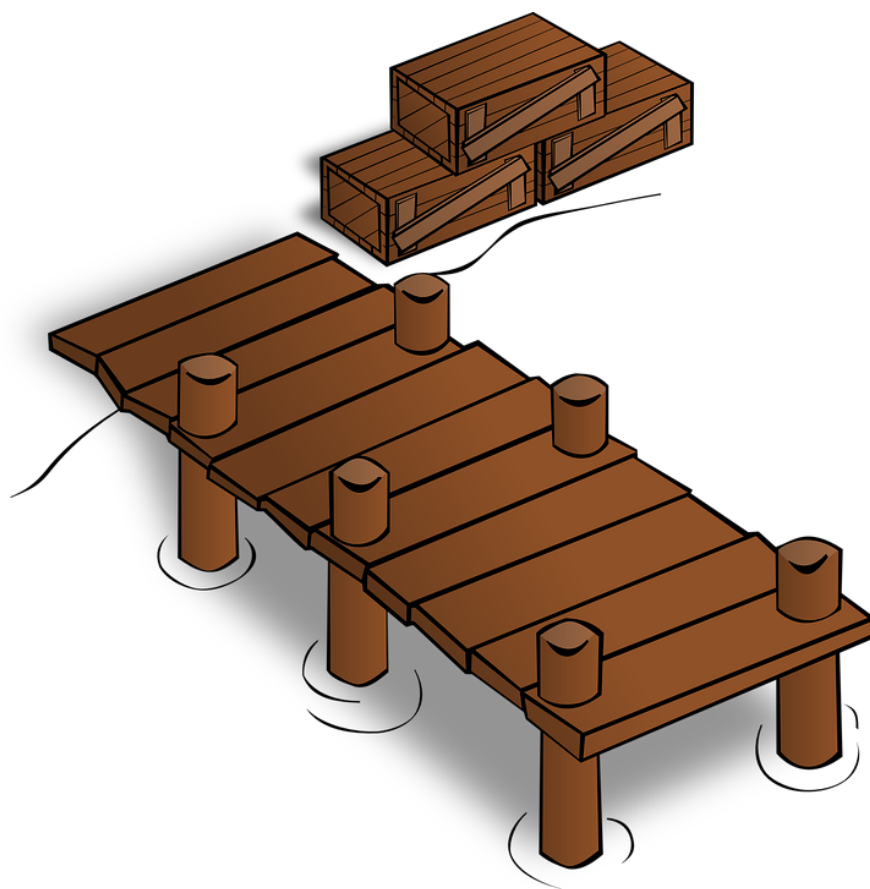
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8.

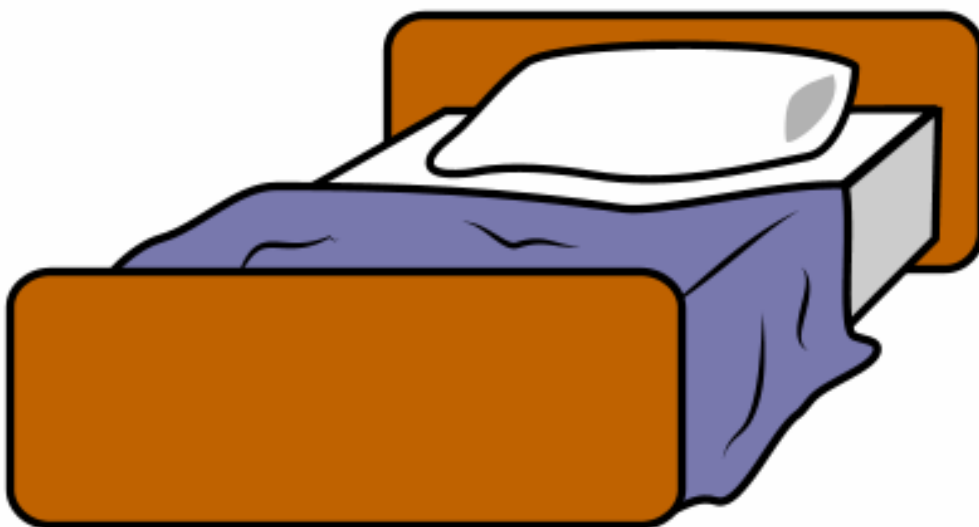


9.

a e i
o u



10.



11.

3



12.



EXERCISE 3: RHYME IDENTIFICATION

The native speaker pronounces each pair of words and the evaluator asks the student to decide whether the 2 words rhyme or not.

1	Disappear /dɪsə'pɪə/ → Beer /bɪə/
2	Tambour /'tæmbʊə/ → Mature /mə'tjʊə/
3	Millionaire /mɪljə'neə/ → Hair /heə/
4	Pray /preɪ/ → Freeway /'fri:weɪ/
5	Schoolboy /'sku:lboɪ/ → Toy /toɪ/
6	Eye /aɪ/ → Butterfly /'bʌtər,flaɪ/
7	Snow /snəʊ/ → Mosquito /məs'ki:təʊ/
8	Eyebrow /'aɪbrəʊ/ → Cow /kaʊ/

1.



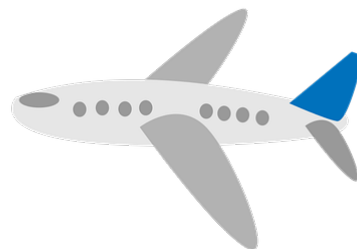
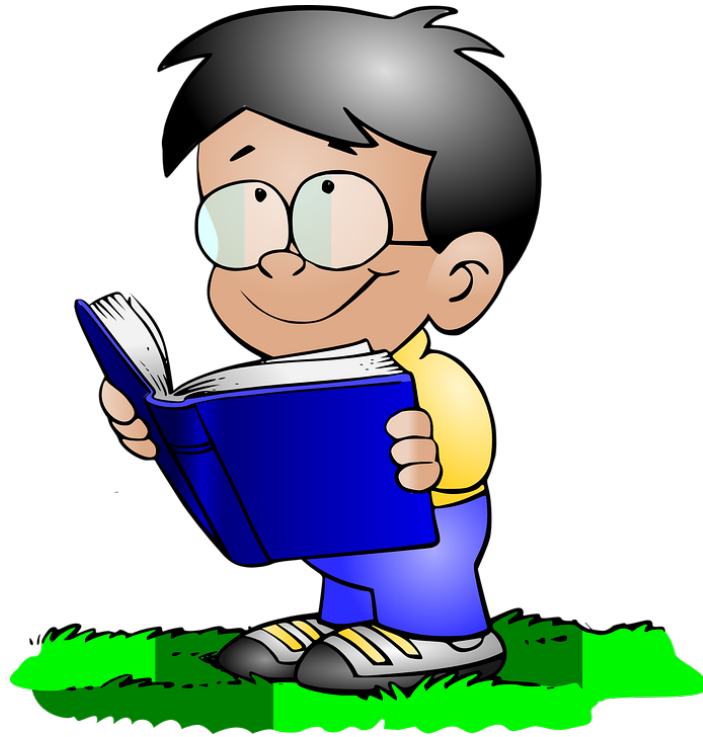
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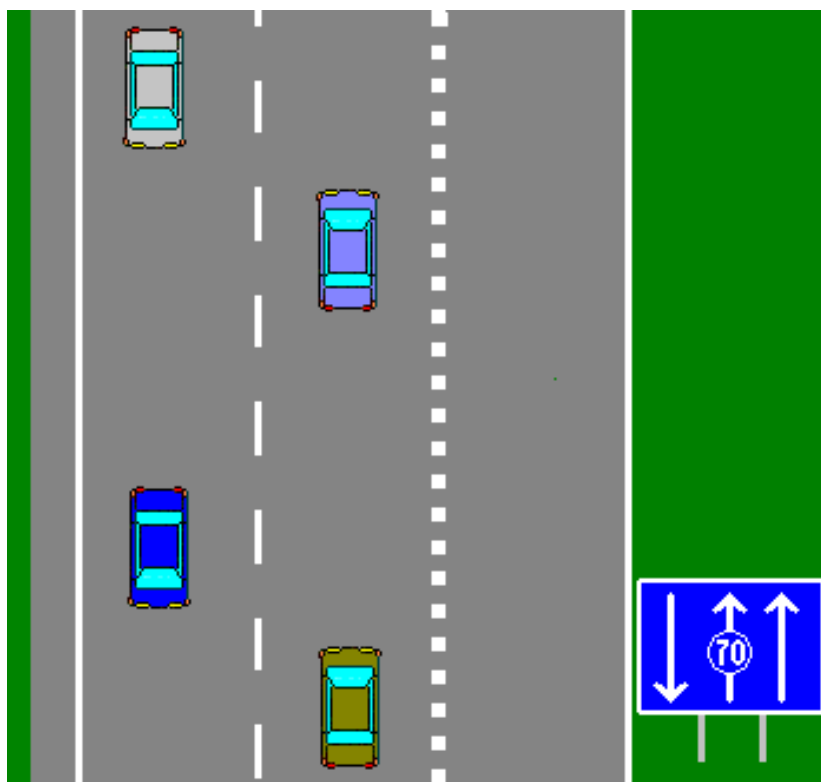
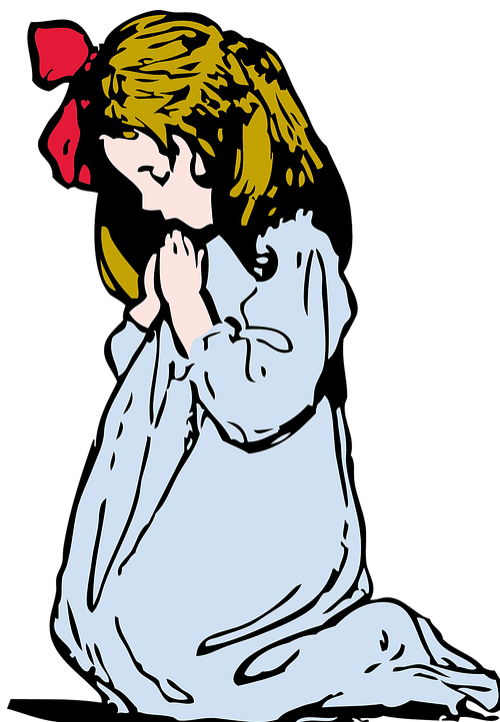
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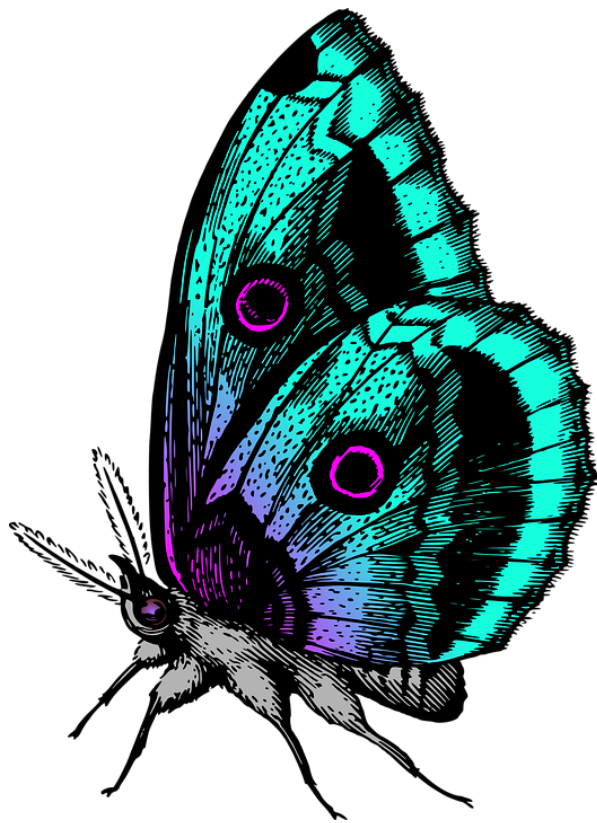
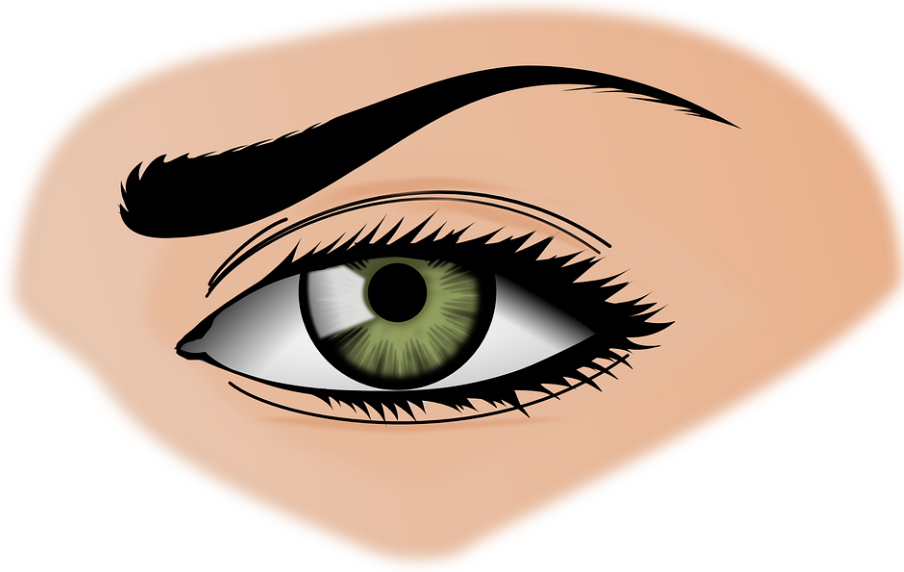
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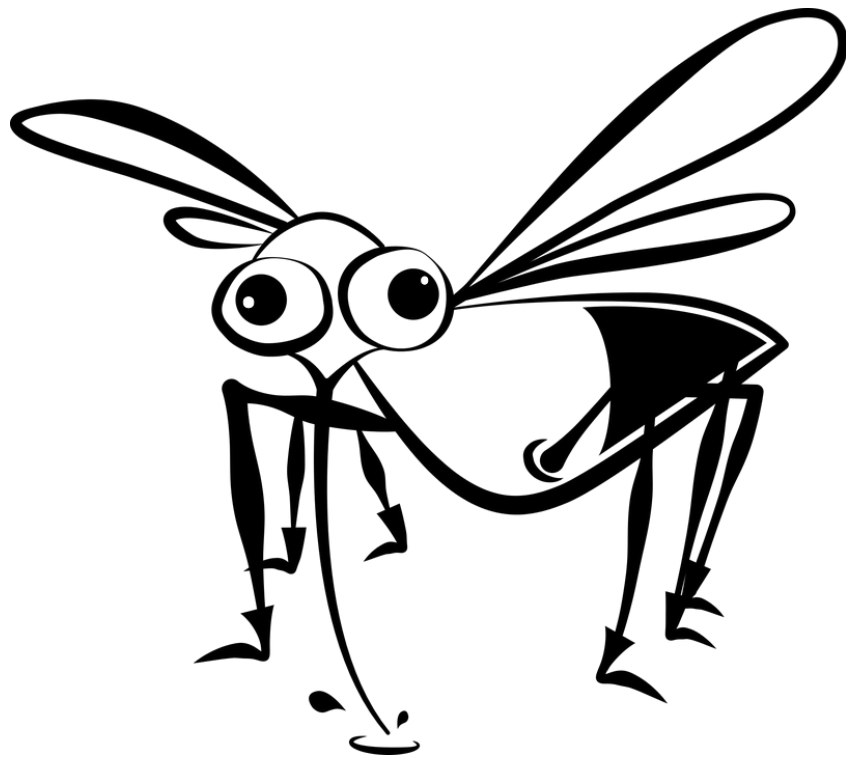
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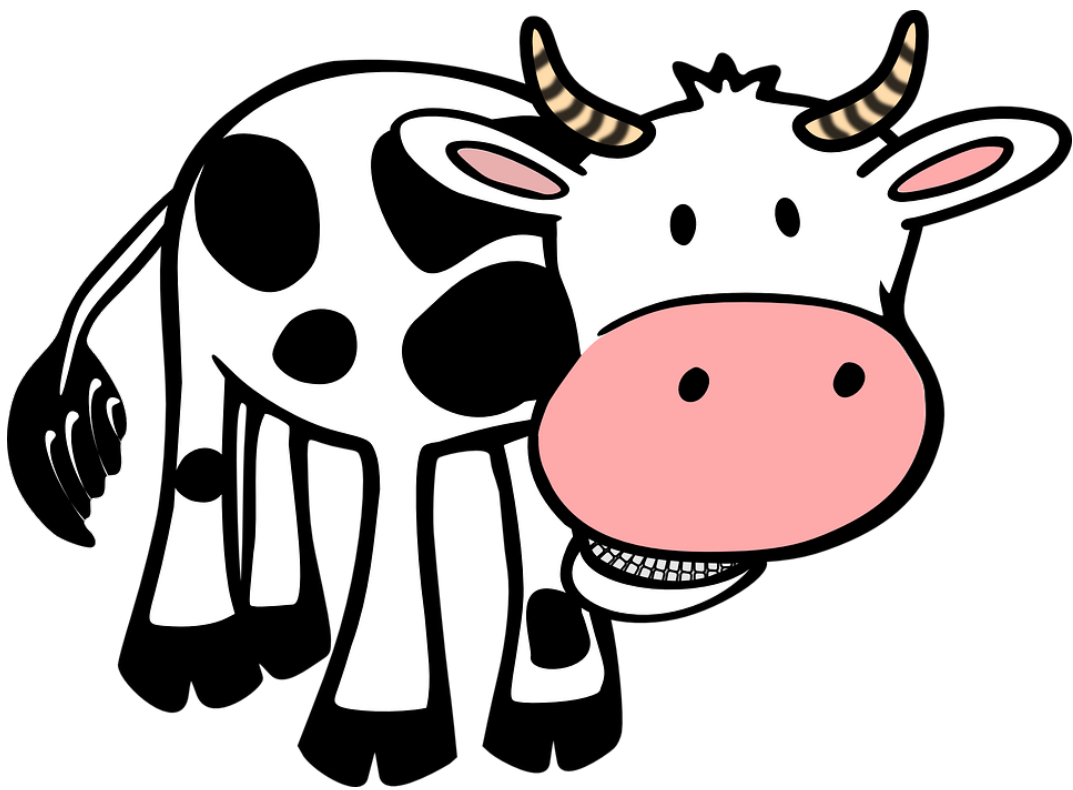
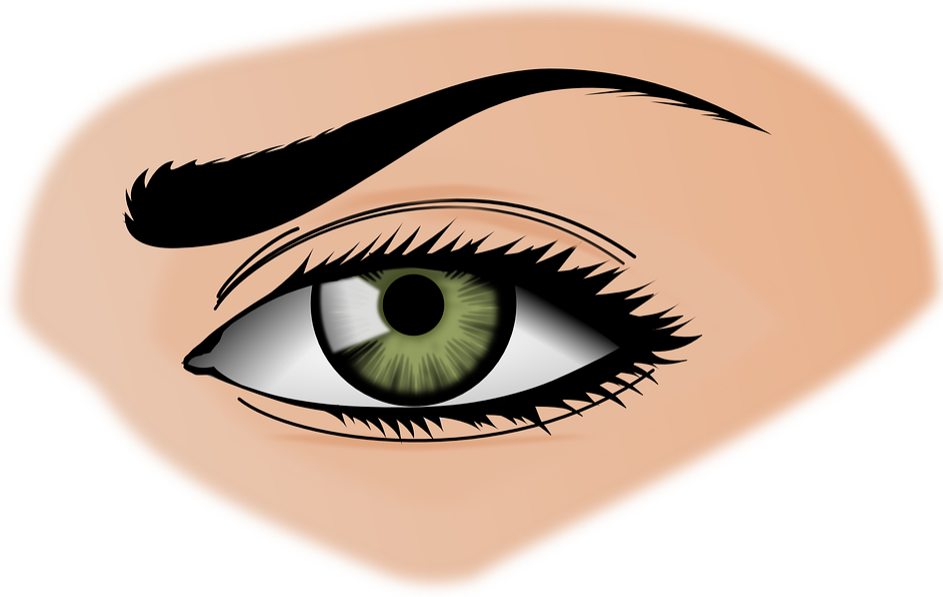
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7.



8.



8.2. Appendix 2: Focus group (document on PA)

“Phonemic awareness is the buzz word of our times. Children who are aware of phonemes move easily and productively into inventive spelling and reading. Children who are not aware of phonemes are at serious risk of failing to learn to read. Educators who teach phonemic awareness have found that doing so accelerates the reading and writing growth of the entire classroom even as it reduces the incidence of children with reading delay. They have also found that attending to children’s phonemic awareness removes phonics from the realm of drill and skill and makes it learnable and interesting to their students” (Adams et al., p. XI).

“Metalinguistic skills, specifically phonological awareness, are linked to successful reading, writing, and vocabulary learning, in both native and foreign languages, being a determining factor in educational and professional success” (Lorenço & Andrade, 2014, p. 315).

“Nursery rhymes, as well as other jingles and word-games, act as a trigger for raising phonological awareness to an explicit level” (Layton & Deeny, 1997, p. 11).

“The advantages concern young children’s intuitive grasp of language and their ability to be more attuned to the phonological system of the new language. The consensus is that children are sensitive to the sounds and the rhythm of new languages and they enjoy copying new sounds and patterns of intonation” (Pinter, 2006, p. 29).

8.3. Appendix 3: Focus group transcription

M (mediadora), R (mestra de P5), E (mestre d'anglès), L (mestra de P5).

M: El meu tema del TFG és quin paper té la consciència fonològica en l'aprenentatge d'una segona llengua. Estic analitzant el sistema català en general, no l'escola en concret. La meua pregunta de recerca és si la consciència fonològica és important per als infants catalans que estan aprenent l'anglès com a llengua estrangera. Fins ara el que he fet és: vaig estar llegint sobre diverses proves de consciència fonològica en català i en anglès però com a primera llengua, no hi ha proves de consciència fonològica d'anglès com a segona llengua. Vaig dissenyar la prova de consciència fonològica i vaig venir a passar-la als infants. Llavors vaig estar fent un anàlisi del currículum de primària ja que l'anglès a infantil no és obligatori. Primer us he portat uns fragments sobre la consciència fonològica.

M: Després de llegir-ho, quin paper creieu que té la consciència fonològica vosaltres com a mestres de llengua catalana i quin paper creieu que té o podria o hauria de tenir en anglès?

R: A la nostra etapa oi? Clar nosaltres en català sí que al ser la primera llengua ho treballem molt. Realment el procés de lectoescriptura comença en el coneixement del so, de la grafia d'aquest, en el treball molt de la paraula, el significat, la pronunciació... i en anglès doncs totes les activitats que anem fent a l'escola també feu moltes coses relacionades amb com pronunciar no?

E: Sí, sí. La història és que els infants que són capaços de pronunciar bé totes les lletres i paraules aprenen abans qualsevol tipus de llengua. Als infants que no tenen això els costa molt més, i evidentment si ja els costa en la primera llengua en anglès encara més, perquè evidentment no tots els sons són els mateixos. Llavors jo amb les dificultats que em trobo són aquestes, que els infants que no són capaços de pronunciar bé alguns sons de la seva llengua materna els costa molt, i que costa fer el canvi cap als sons que són diferents. Costa quan comencen a parlar però sobretot quan comencen a escriure.

M: La meua experiència personal és que ara a la universitat hem fet una assignatura d'anglès, i va ser un xoc molt gran per mi adonar-me que pronunciava coses malament i descobrir que hi havia tantes vocals i tants sons. Llavors, no sé si tu com a mestre d'anglès has vist un canvi en l'educació de quan jo per exemple anava a l'escola a ara, de fer que els infants siguin més conscients que en anglès hi ha sons que són diferents o nous. Jo personalment, si no me'ls haguessin dit mai no els hauria percebut.

R: Clar jo personalment vaig començar anglès quan feia 3r de primària, i va ser directament escrit, no hi va haver res oral abans. No hi havia la part aquesta que es fa ara a infantil.

E: Hi ha una cosa que ha canviat respecte a això que esteu dient. Els infants tot just estan aprenent el català en aquest moment [a cicle inicial], llavors se'ls deixa escriure l'anglès tal qual els sona a ells. Això fa que el so el puguin integrar mentalment i amb el temps, a base de visualitzar-ho moltes vegades, poden aprendre la paraula ben escrita. Però durant un temps se'ls deixa fer això perquè prenguin la consciència que es pronuncia d'una manera però que de manera correcta s'escriu d'una altra. Clar, això no ho vam tenir mai nosaltres.

M: I això m'estàs parlant d'abans d'introduir la paraula escrita de manera normativa?

E: Exacte, exacte. Primer ho fem tot oral. Sempre hi ha un suport visual, però potser a la mateixa sessió no capten que aquella paraula que estem dient oralment representa en anglès aquella imatge que veuen, i potser ho capten al cap d'unes sessions. Per tant adquireixen el vocabulari únicament per com el perceben oralment. També és cert que abans no hi havia la correcció de la pronunciació que ara hi ha.

M: Suposo que com a mestre també el fet que se'ls permeti aquest pas per l'ortografia natural en anglès et permet veure clarament si l'infant està percebent la paraula tal com es pronuncia.

E: Exacte. Llavors nosaltres durant un temps fem això. El que sí que els demanem és que el que copiem ho copiïn bé, ja que en el fons és una còpia. Ara el que ells fan com a producció lliure sense model ho poden escriure com ells ho tenen dins el cap.

R: I com que l'aprenentatge d'una llengua, tant la pròpia com una altra, el fan de la mateixa manera, els és més fàcil.

M: I això creieu que és força generalitzat a totes les escoles?

E: Jo penso que en general sí que va per aquí.

R: Jo crec que sí, que metodològicament anem per aquí.

E: A part que jo crec que és la millor manera perquè l'infant pugui entendre com sona i com s'escriu.

R: Clar, és un bon model d'aprenentatge això. Si no seria una cosa molt mecànica.

M: D'acord. El següent que m'agradaria que comentéssim és aquest anàlisi que he fet del currículum de primària. El podem mirar entre tots per sobre. Al primer paràgraf comento que l'anglès no és obligatori a infantil i, per tant, jo considero que un infant hauria de tenir èxit a 1r de primària sense saber res d'anglès. No sé si passa això.

L: Jo crec que no.

R: No.

E: Jo crec que la tendència és de cada cop començar abans a fer-ho tot. És més, a la nostra escola comencen a P1, que els expliquen històries, els canten cançons. Ells no són conscients que retenen, però alguna cosa segur que retenen. I l'altra és que hi ha infants que a parvulari ja van a l'acadèmia. Evidentment, tu arribes a 1r i hi ha molts nivells. Com a mestre et trobes que has de poder oferir activitats per tots, i aquesta potser és la dificultat més gran.

M: Clar, potser les famílies se senten pressionades de pensar que quan el seu fill/a arribi a 1r, tots els seus companys hauran fet anglès abans.

E: Tot i així jo faig 1r i comencem des del principi. Ja no dones coses per sabudes. Vaig trobar molta diferència un any que vaig fer anglès a P5 i després els vaig continuar a 1r. A més, no ens va venir cap infant nou i, per tant, jo ja sabia el que sabien, i va ser tot molt més fàcil. Sí que és cert que la societat està una mica pressionada amb l'anglès.

R: De fet, no hi ha cap evidència de que un infant que comenci a aprendre una llengua abans l'apregui millor que un altre. Jo crec que és un tema maduratiu, estan preparats quan estan preparats.

M: De fet, el currículum diu que "per formar parlants plurilingües i interculturals cal, en primer lloc, l'assoliment de la competència plena en català".

E: Clar.

M: Un infant de P3 no té una competència plena en català.

E: És que ni a 1r.

M: Però per altra banda, veus que a 1r t'apareix la llengua escrita com a contingut i criteri d'avaluació, i és com que et deixa una mica en un carreró sense sortida, perquè també diu que parlar i escoltar bé són habilitats que vertebraren la resta de dimensions. Clar, com ho fas? Si he de començar la llengua escrita a 1r he d'haver fet llengua oral abans, i abans és infantil.

R: I a infantil representa que no és obligatori... No només l'anglès, sinó l'escola. Ara perquè des de ben petits van a l'escola, però podria ser que algú no hi anés. Donen una responsabilitat a una etapa que no li correspon.

E: Jo veig dues coses. Una, que les famílies en general estan pressionades per fer anglès abans, i no et sabria dir el perquè. Si és pel fracàs a l'escola o és perquè la societat et porta a que has de saber anglès per qualsevol cosa.

L: Jo crec que també és perquè les famílies no en saben i volen que els seus fills des de ben petits en comencin a aprendre. I això moltes famílies ho diuen: "jo he hagut de fer molt esforç ara d'adult per aprendre'l i vull que ells des de ben petits ho tinguin integrat".

E: I inclús moltes famílies encara volen més del que es fa. Realment no és obligatori, es fa, però les famílies encara no en tenen prou.

R: Hi ha famílies que si tenen domini de la llengua anglesa utilitzen l'anglès amb els seus fills, i això es nota.

E: És una mica contradictori perquè clar, com diu el currículum has d'haver assolit el català per aprendre anglès, però incrementar les hores d'anglès suposa reduir les de català. És com que perds la base d'un per assolir l'altre.

R: És que el currículum de per si és contradictori. D'una banda t'explica la importància del català però et diu que cal introduir l'anglès escrit a 1r, cosa que implica que hi ha hagut d'haver una pràctica oral abans.

E: I l'altra és la tendència que hi ha ara en l'ensenyament-aprenentatge dels infants. Nosaltres els ensenyem i hem de partir del ritme de cada infant. Clar evidentment aquí tens una dificultat molt gran per quan has d'introduir cada cosa. Llavors costa molt assolir el mateix nivell. I si ja estàs en desigualtat de nivell en català imagina't en anglès.

M: I lògicament costa molt fer això quan ets un sol mestre amb 20 o 25 infants.

E: Costa molt, però anem fent.

M: Finalment, la única menció de consciència fonològica que vaig trobar va ser això que diu que "l'expressió oral en llengües estrangeres implica el coneixement [...] d'uns elements fonètics que contribueixen a la fluïdesa de la parla".

E: Sí que és veritat que a 1r, que es en teoria quan ells haurien o podrien començar l'anglès, donem molta més importància a la part oral. La part escrita la fem a través de com ells perceben els sons, independentment de com s'escriu. Tampoc pots avançar gaire amb la part escrita, ja que és el que la situació et permet.

M: L'escriptura formal quan la introduïu?

E: A finals de primer ells ja són capaços d'escriure correctament frases molt curtes i "típiques". Òbviament tenim de tot. De fet, ells les acaben assimilant a partir de veure-les moltes vegades.

M: O sigui que feu un procés molt similar al que feu en català oi?

E: Exacte. Més o menys sí. Bàsicament 1r i 2n ve a ser això, 2n una mica més fortet, amb frases una mica més elaborades (canvi de subjecte, singular i plural). I llavors 3r ja és un altre nivell, perquè ja és el 3r any que ho fan. Però sí, 1r i 2n són els que més es treballa la part oral perquè tampoc hi ha un nivell alt en llengua catalana de llengua escrita. Més que res són

jocs a l'aula de vocabulari i d'histories petites que pots ensenyar a la pissarra digital. I llavors intentem animar-los a que parlin sobre el que hem vist.

R: I el fet de veure una paraula també ajuda a que la interioritzin tal com s'escriu. Al final acaben associant la imatge d'aquella paraula.

E: Sí sí, tranquil·lament.

M: Molt bé. Ara passem a la prova que vaig fer. Aquestes són les làmines que vaig utilitzar. En el primer exercici simplement vaig escollir una paraula que contingés cadascun dels sons que hi ha en el sistema fonètic anglès i demanava als infants que repetissin la paraula després que la parlant nativa la pronunciés. De cada paraula només tenia en compte la pronunciació del so que era objecte d'avaluació. Vaig fer les proves amb 17 infants catalanoparlants que només feien anglès a l'escola. Abans de començar cada exercici els feia unes quantes proves amb català i amb paraules inventades, perquè el significat no influís, per això en alguns exercicis veureu que no tots els infants van ser considerats vàlids. Van haver-hi 5 infants que van ser capaços de pronunciar correctament entre 22 i 33 sons i 12 en van pronunciar correctament entre 33 i 39. Tots els infants fallaven sons que no són catalans. El que vaig veure és que fallaven molt amb sons que sembla que siguin iguals que en català però no ho són, com ara les vocals llargues. També els passava amb la /p/, la /b/, la /d/ i la /t/, que en anglès són aspirades.

R: De fet hi ha infants que alguns sons a finals de P5 encara els costa pronunciar-los.

M: En el segon exercici els ensenyava una per una aquestes làmines on hi ha dos dibuixos entre els quals només difereix un so. La parlant nativa pronunciava les dues paraules i jo els demanava si sonaven exactament iguals o sonaven una mica diferents. En els resultats primer ho he separat segons el nombre d'encerts de cadascun dels infants i després ho he separat en 4 categories segons el tipus de so que és diferent en cadascuna de les parelles (llargada de la vocal, vocals que són similars, final sord i sonor, i consonants similars). Les consonants els costen més, però jo el que vaig anar veient és que no era ni molt positiu ni molt negatiu.

R: Allò que dius, anem fent, no?

M: Exacte. No és com per dir que no tenen l'habilitat de distingir entre dos sons, perquè sí que la tenen, però hi ha sons que no els distingeixen. És a dir, no els perceben però molts adults tampoc els percebrien. És una qüestió que en català també hi hauria sons que no diferenciaríem si no féssim aquest treball de consciència fonològica que fem. Una persona de Madrid no diferenciarà entre la e oberta i la e tancada, però perquè no la tenen i no l'han treballat. És una cosa que no surt de manera natural.

E: Clar. De fet, segurament si portessis algú amb un accent diferent ho percebrien diferent però no sabrien ben bé què.

R: Jo puc sentir que un britànic i un americà parlen diferent però si em demanessis en què són diferents no t'ho sabria dir.

M: El tercer exercici és sobre rimes i funcionava igual que l'exercici 2. I igual que abans, la majoria es mouen pel mig. I no hi ha cap diferència entre uns diftongs o uns altres.

R: Clar en català ho dominen perquè és una cosa que fem habitualment, però en anglès no és una cosa que acostumin a fer i per tant no ho poden associar a res que hagin viscut.

M: La pregunta final és com vosaltres creieu que podria afectar si apliquéssim a l'aprenentatge de l'anglès el joc lingüístic i l'observació de la llengua oral que es fa en català.

E: Clar, hi guanyaríem.

R: Molt.

M: Ho faríeu? I si ho faríeu, quan ho faríeu?

R: Jo crec que si fos d'una manera que això quedés específic en un currículum... Clar ara per ara es fa d'una manera que cada escola ho fa...

E: Com pot, com li sembla i com creu.

R: Clar és que no tens una referència perquè pels mestres no és una llengua clara i nostra. És una llengua de fora que l'estàs treballant i que cadascú ho fa a la seva manera. Tot seria acceptable perquè no hi ha res escrit. Si es fes consciència fonològica i estigués escrit t'asseguraries que arribessin a primer preparats o com a mínim sabries què han treballat. Seria bàsic perquè hi hagués un seguiment.

M: A part, a moltes escoles els mestres d'anglès a infantil o bé són mestres de primària que baixen a infantil o bé són persones que dominen l'anglès però que no són mestres.

E: Hi ha un buit. Tu ets especialista però no saps tractar amb aquella edat o saps tractar amb aquella edat però no ets especialista d'anglès i no saps fer-ho bé. És un handicap. Costa molt tenir gent d'infantil i d'anglès. Referent a si ho faríem: sí, evidentment, si ho fas hi guanyes. Clar aquí et trobes amb un límit d'hores, de temps i de currículum. Jo sé que a final de curs he d'assolir X continguts i que he d'anar a un ritme, i tinc unes hores per fer-ho. Si a més a més hi fiques això, que trobo que està molt bé, una de dues: o deixes de donar contingut i llavors a 2h s'ha d'anar més a poc a poc, o has d'incrementar hores.

R: La nostra flexibilitat d'infantil aquí no passa. A infantil com que no ho tenim al currículum podem tirar més pel joc, les cançons, etc. A partir de 1r ja han d'introduir la llengua escrita perquè hi ha un currículum que t'ho diu.

M: Tu personalment preferiries que el currículum et marqués unes fites per finals de 6è de primària i tu poguessis organitzar-ho com volguessis?

E: Tindria aquesta avantatge que en els primers anys podria dedicar més temps a l'aprenentatge fonològic i a integrar tot això i al mateix temps després podria anar més ràpid amb els continguts que et venen darrere. Potser seria una manera, però hi ha gent que prefereix saber què han de fer cada any. Hi ha gent que sabria com estructurar-ho i gent que es perdria. És complicat fer-ho bé per tothom.

R: Clar potser hi hauria gent que arribaria al final de l'etapa i hauria de córrer a fer-ho tot. De fet, ja hem de córrer, perquè volem respectar el ritme de cada nen.

M: Però el pots respectar fins a 6è.

E: Clar. Tens un llistó que han de passar.

M: Vosaltres personalment heu tingut o teniu la sensació que feu més coses (acadèmicament) de les que us agradaria fer?

E: Ens hem acostumat a anar a aquest ritme. A infantil es senten pressionats perquè saben que si els infants arriben a 1r sense saber llegir tindran problemes. Ens hem ficat en aquest cicle viciós que costa respondre.

M: És com una sensació que en comptes d'empènyer des de baix s'empeny des de dalt.

R: Sí, sí, potser sí. Evidentment si has d'esperar uns resultats... Hi ha moments en les etapes que has de fer aquest pas de veure fins on han d'arribar. Però també crec que si no hi hagués aquest moment cauríem en l'error de no provar-ho, i hi ha infants que necessiten una mica que prenguis la iniciativa. Cal provar-ho, simplement per veure on estem i saber com ajudar-lo, no per sentenciar-lo a que no ho sap fer.

L: Aquesta pressió ens ve una mica de fora, però els mestres també som d'una manera que ens la posem nosaltres mateixos.

R: Sí que es cert que a vegades s'haurien de prioritzar certes coses i se'n volen englobar masses. En la societat que estem s'ha de saber de tot i s'ha de ser bo en tot.

E: I l'anglès es demana per tot i es demana un nivell alt. Has d'estar a l'alçada.

R: Quan llegeixes el currículum sí que hi ha coses que les veus molt clares però altres no, i tu ets qui estàs a l'aula i veus la realitat i la diversitat, i t'has d'adaptar.

E: I una escola privada no té el mateix nivell d'exigència que una escola pública.

M: I les famílies poden veure el currículum i saben què "hauria d'estar fent" el seu fill/a.

R: Sí, estem en una era que les famílies saben perfectament què toca a cada edat, i busquen coses per internet.

M: Clar, és que el currículum no dona gaire espai a poder justificar a una família que quan el seu fill/a estigui preparat per fer-ho ja ho farà, perquè la família et dirà: Ja, però ho hauria d'estar fent ara.

R: I tant.

E: A les 5 et toquen la porta i un pare o una mare et diu que com és que el seu fill no està al nivell que hauria d'estar.

R: I les famílies es pensen que perquè el seu fill fa anglès des de P1 en sabrà més. Socialment costa molt entendre que això no té perquè ser així.

L: I també comparen molt.

M: Perfecte, moltíssimes gràcies per haver col·laborat amb aquest treball i per haver compartit la vostra opinió i la vostra experiència amb mi.