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# INTRODUCING VERY YOUNG ENGLISH LEARNERS TO PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS IN ENGLISH:

The story of *Little bee, little bee!*

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4th year. Final Degree Project

Double degree in early childhood education and primary education (majoring in English)

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## **Abstract**

The aim of the present final degree project was to design a book and a teaching guide to introduce very young learners to phonological awareness in English. The didactic proposal was created taking into account a common difficulty between Spanish and Catalan speakers, which is to differentiate English vowels, especially where length is a part of the difference. It is thought for students in last year of Early Childhood Education that are learning English. The final objective of the proposal will be to encourage children to play with the language while they discover the new sounds of English.

**Key words:** very young learners, phonological awareness, English as a foreign language, vowel sounds

## **Resum**

L'objectiu del present projecte ha estat dissenyar un llibre i una guia didàctica per introduir els infants a la consciència fonològica en anglès. La proposta didàctica s'ha creat a partir d'una dificultat comuna entre castellanoparlants i catalanoparlants, que és diferenciar les vocals angleses, sobretot quan la longitud és part de la diferència. Està pensat per als alumnes de darrer curs d'Educació Infantil que estan aprenent anglès. L'objectiu final de la proposta es animar els infants a jugar amb la llengua mentre descobreixen nous sons de la llengua anglesa.

**Key words:** Educació infantil, consciència fonològica, anglès com a llengua estrangera, sons vocàlics

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## **1. Introduction**

For the last ten years, we have been witnessing an early start on learning English as a foreign language. In many schools in our education system, children are exposed to English from a very young age. This exposure is exclusively oral, so teachers need to provide their students with a solid language role model that has clear and accurate pronunciation. Moreover, the main goal of the teachers in Early Childhood Education (ECE) is to help students be understood by any listener, that is why teaching pronunciation needs to be considered an essential component of the process of learning a language from the very beginning. Phonological awareness is the ability to recognize and manipulate speech sounds consciously and deliberately, being a useful tool for learners to be aware of the sound system. English pronunciation and spelling often do not correspond with children's native language, which can make the learning process difficult. For this reason, it is important for teachers to pay special attention to the development of phonological awareness in their students.

The purpose of this report is to design didactic materials to introduce very young learners to phonological awareness in English and encourage them to play with the language while they discover new sounds and a new language. But also, to provide ECE teachers with a comprehensive and accessible resource that can be used to introduce the development of phonological awareness among their students. This material includes a book and a range of activities created for the last year of ECE, but it can also be used in lower grades or in the first grades of Primary Education, depending on the age at which English is introduced.

Furthermore, the present study wants to connect concepts learned during my degree in different courses about language acquisition, in the native language and in the foreign one. In addition, the study provides a review of the current literature to support the choice of sounds and activities designed to introduce phonological awareness instruction in English. By doing so, combining my role as an Early Childhood teacher with the role of a researcher.

In this paper, firstly, you will find the theoretical framework structured in different sections. Then, the didactic proposal is presented with the process of creation of the book and the follow-up activities. Finally, in the appendices a sample of the book, the teaching guide, and the materials needed to develop the activities are presented.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Learning English as a Foreign Language in Early Childhood Education

Globalisation and technological progress have developed the need of using one language to be able to communicate internationally. English has been positioned as the international language of communication. Being proficient in English is increasingly viewed as a door open to better opportunities in the global labour market. Hence, parents put more focus on providing English language learning opportunities as early as possible, seen as a form of investing in their children's future (Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). Due to parental pressure on educational institutions, we have been witnessing an early start on the learning of English as a foreign language.

Moreover, traditionally it is believed that starting to learn a second language earlier (L2) guarantees a successful acquisition in the long term as expressed in the popular belief *the earlier, the better*. Erk & Ručević (2021) mention that traditionally it is associated the age factor as a necessary condition for achieving high competence on learning English. But also, the authors suggest that recently new believes have been developed alongside this idea, and now the age factor in the acquisition of a new language is interpreted as a macrovariable. Flege (2008), who talked first about the complex role of the age in the second language acquisition, exposes that now it is interpreted as a macrovariable in interactions with individual traits in the maturational process (cognitive, affective, social and physical). However, the age factor and individual traits interact with context variables such as the community, language policy, education system, and the opportunities given inside and outside of the family circle.

Another, significant factor in an early start of a second language acquisition, is the necessity of some conditions to implement a learning program in early childhood education. Bland (2015) states five main ideas which are *teacher expertise, sustaining motivation over time, continuity, aims and out-of-school learning*. Firstly, teachers are the student's linguistic models when they are acquiring a language, so it is required an advanced level of language skills fluency and the ability to implement appropriate methodological skills. Children need solid foundations, variety, wealth and accuracy because they will absorb everything that is offered to them (Lobo, 2012). Secondly, a difficult teachers' task is to maintain students' motivation over time, which is a serious challenge where English is taught for long periods. In an effort to stimulate motivation, teachers should find an appropriate balance between fun and cognitive engagement to the task. Young learners have a high level of motivation for being captivated in new language experiences, which

might be presented in a funny way (Bland, 2015). Thirdly, if we start to teach English at preschool is important to give a continuity on the learning process to help students to connect their previous and new knowledge. Fourthly, teaching a foreign language, as teaching other areas, implies to define clear outcomes if we want to provide a quality successful learning environment, and the aims might be according to the age and cognitive development of the children. Finally, Lobo (2012) talks about the importance of a daily contact with the language because children need time to be exposed to English. Referring to this idea, the opportunities that children have out-of-school are crucial for a longer exposition to the language. Overall, these are necessary conditions might be considered to implement a language learning program in, to ensure that it is being developed in a good education environment.

In the same way, it is critical to consider that children in Early Childhood Education are getting ready to acquire writing and reading skills in their first language, and in a progressive way they are learning the alphabet principle, so until they are 5 years old most of them do not read or write in the first language. As it happens with the first language, most of the activities developed in class are oral ones, in the same way English is also introduced orally. Therefore, it comes up the importance of teaching pronunciation and having qualified models since they start to learn a new language.

## **2.2. Teaching pronunciation**

It is not common to see foreign language pronunciation classes with very young learners, Grant (2014) mentions that “research and pedagogical practice over the last two decades of the twentieth century conspired to marginalize pronunciation instruction. [...] Language teaching shifted to an approach that seemed incompatible with pronunciation instruction” (p.39). The author also pointed out that “during the audiolingual era of the 1950s and 1960s, pronunciation skills were a central aspect of L2 classrooms. Students were taught to mimic native speaker models as accurately as possible as a means of developing good habits of oral language production” (p.38). But, most recent research has shown that learners would gradually develop acceptable English pronunciation even without any special pronunciation instruction if the models are good and the teachers have the skills to make learners aware of the need of accurate pronunciation.

However, the main goal as teachers is to help students be intelligible, in other words, for listeners to understand them without effort or confusion. We should have in mind that students need to have a “standard” pronunciation because either an accent or seeming a native speaker is the

principal purpose for a language learner. As Yoshida (2016) states “speakers need to come fairly close to some kind of a recognized standard, whether it’s one of the major native-speaker varieties or a nonnative variety of pronunciation that is easily understood by listeners from many backgrounds” (p.2). The author talks about how the age of the learners affects the pronunciation learning, children “seem to absorb the sounds and words they hear around them and, little by little, learn to imitate them accurately” (p.3). Moreover, only if they are exposed to the language and given numerous opportunities to hear it spoken children can absorb language sounds more naturally than adults and come close to mimicking native speaker pronunciation (Yoshida, 2016). She also agrees that young children can copy the new sounds and naturally reproduce the inputs they receive in English.

Furthermore, by teaching pronunciation teachers can avoid from the very beginning fossilization, the process that a learner goes through when he or she makes progress up to a certain point but then it is difficult for him or her to advance more (Yoshida, 2016). In other words, the learner internalizes a way of pronouncing a word that is not correct because nobody told him or her that it is not well pronounced. So, it is simpler to start learning a foreign language on the right foot of pronunciation than to attempt to correct fossilization later.

Finally, another two concepts that must be pointed out is perception and production. As Yoshida (2016) mentions, “being able to hear the difference between sounds in a new language is as important as being able to produce the sounds” (p. 7), learners should be able to perceive new sounds of the language to be able to produce them later. The same author explains that “our brain develops a phonological filter that lets us hear the sounds of our own language very efficiently but “filters out” and ignores unfamiliar, unnecessary sounds” (p.7). For this reason, language learners should become more aware of new sounds, pay great attention to what they hear, and practice accurately imitating new sounds. It is not only important to develop perception skills for students, but also teaching perception is important to be able to hear how we produce the sound and how it is pronounced (Derwing & Munro, 2014).

The main goal of teaching pronunciation is the intelligibility of the students, meaning that learners have to be understood by any user of the language. But, this is not only about correcting students' pronunciation when they talk, it also involves acquiring perception skills of the new sounds to be able to produce them and this issue is connected to the next point of this project, which is phonological awareness.

### 2.3. Phonological awareness

Phonological awareness is considered a metalinguistic ability, and it is the awareness that words can be separated into syllables and individual sounds, and the ability to execute mental operations on these units. In other words, “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. 7). Gorman & Gillam (2003) also state that “phonological awareness is not reading, and it is not phonics. It is the ability to segment and manipulate words, syllables, and sounds which are heard and spoken” (p. 336). According to Adams, Foorman, Lundberg and Beeler (2004), the idea that spoken language is composed of groupings of these tiny sounds does not come actually or effortlessly to people, which leads us to accept that this ability must be prepared and learned. Hence, phonological awareness includes two main ideas: the first one, is that it is an ability or skill; and the second one, is that it involves an explicit analysis of language.

Many authors consider phonological awareness a key ability to develop and acquire reading skills. Gorman & Gillam (2003), for example, state that “sensitivity to syllables in Spanish may be particularly important for later reading success, and the ability to segment words into their phonemes may play a critical role in reading acquisition” (p. 1). Other authors such as Layton & Deeny (2002) point out the importance of phonological awareness for reading and writing, “phonological awareness is necessary for readers to make full use of the alphabetic principle which underpins our written language system” (p.8). For children an alphabetic script without being aware that words are made up of sounds has no sense, this evidence shows how crucial phonological awareness is. It is essential to recognize that proficient decoding requires more than just phonological awareness. However, orthographic knowledge must be acquired once phonological awareness is established (Schuele & Boudreau, 2008). Therefore, awareness of phonemes is necessary to know the alphabetic principle that underlies our system of written language.

Nevertheless, phonological awareness facilitates reading but also is facilitated by reading. According to Font & Vilaró (2002) *“la consciència fonològica és precursora de l'aprenentatge de la lectura, que està influida per l'ensenyament i la pràctica de la lectura i que pot ser tant una causa com una conseqüència de l'adquisició lectora. [...] Aquesta relació recíproca significa que la consciència fonològica és important abans i durant l'aprenentatge de la lectura”* (p. 137). Hence, as teachers, we should not only train our pupils on phonological awareness before the



introduction of the written language, but we should also keep it in mind during and after the process of developing reading abilities.

Also, Font & Vilaró (2002) who define six convergence areas between phonological awareness and reading, state that deficits and delays in phonological awareness identified during early years can be essential to be able to determine children at risk of reading difficulties. In addition, a study carried out by Pape-Neumann, Ermingen-Marbach, Grande, Willmes & Heim (2015) with dyslexic third and fourth graders, conclude that phonological awareness training is an effective intervention to significantly improve reading comprehension. Thus, phonological awareness training could be a good predictor and reinforcement of reading difficulties in children.

### 2.3.1. Phonological awareness in the foreign language class

Many of the studies about phonological awareness are centred in phonological awareness in the first language, and there is not much research on the role that it develops in the second language acquisition. However, Lourenço & Andrade (2014) carried out a study about a program designed to help Portuguese children to be aware of the similarities and differences between languages. The authors noted in their study 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, we might consider that when we learn a foreign language the native language influences the process. As Cameron (2001) suggests “all levels of language can provide cues, including lexis, morphology (words endings and prefixes) and phonology (the sound system of a language) [...] children become sensitive to the reliability of cues in their first language from early infancy” (p. 14). Along the same lines, Flege (1992) argues that if there is a previous establishment of L1, phonological patterns can influence and interfere with the establishment of L2 patterns, meaning that, L2 learners can interpret an L2 word using the phonemic units of the L1. In fact, Wang & Geva (2003) carried out a study of spelling in English L2 among Cantonese-speaking children. This study showed that difficulties in long-term memory representation are not orthographic in nature, it is on auditory discrimination difficulties of English L2 phonemes that are

absent from Cantonese phonology. These findings give us a glimpse of the influence the native language has on the acquisition of a foreign language, especially on the phonology sound system.

Hence, speakers of the same language might present similar phonological patterns due to their native language. Swan and Smith (2001) expose the main difficulties of English learners have in different languages. In the Speakers of Spanish and Catalan section, they present different language areas, but what matters in the present discussion are phonological difficulties:

“Some common features of the pronunciation typical of Spanish and Catalan speakers of English are:

- Difficulty in recognising and using English vowels.
- Strong devoicing of final voiced consonants.
- Even sentence rhythm, without the typical prominences of English, making understanding difficult for English listeners.
- Narrower range of pitch (in European speakers), producing a bored effect.” (p. 91)

Regarding the first difficult, Swan & Smith (2001) define in more detail the vowels common struggles. Although they mention the different number of vowels and diphthongs between Spanish and Catalan speakers, the length is a distinctive feature. “Consequently, learners find difficulty in differentiating between English vowels, especially where length is a part of the difference” (p. 91). For example, Spanish and Catalan speakers confused the words *seat* and *sit* because /i:/ and /I/ sounds correspond to their language sound /i/. It also happened with other vowel sounds such as the Spanish/Catalan /u/ corresponds to the English /u:/ as in *pool*, and /ʊ/ as in *pull*. Moreover, “two English vowels share the ‘phonetic space’ occupied by one Spanish/Catalan vowel, so one-to-one correspondences are practically impossible” (Swan & Smith, 2001, p. 91).

Returning to the study carried out by Lourenço & Andrade (2014) mentioned at the beginning of this section, they find evidence that phonological awareness skills help students with their reading, writing and vocabulary learning in native and foreign languages. Considering the influence that the L1 has on the L2, and the common difficulties shared by the speakers of the same language, phonological awareness might be a tool to use in foreign language acquisition to help students to determine the different sound system of each language.

### 2.3.2. Phonological awareness instruction

Phonological awareness is the ability to segment words into syllables and sounds, and it is not innate. It is important to work on this ability for developing reading and writing skills, as we have seen not only in the first language but also in the second or foreign language. But, the question is, how are we supposed to train phonological awareness in our students?

Firstly, an important aspect is the time of exposure to English, “it would appear necessary that it be a 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). However, in most schools the amount of time taught in English is limited to a few hours a week, and it is less in Early Childhood Education. The current Catalan Curriculum does not include the foreign language as a mandatory content in this stage, they mentioned that *“el projecte lingüístic ha de tenir en compte, quan el context sociolingüístic escolar ho permeti, poder iniciar un primer contacte amb l’ús oral d’una llengua estrangera, especialment en el darrer curs de l’etapa”* (Departament d’educació de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023, p. 8).

Seeing that daily practice is an ideal characteristic, but complicated to live out, it is important the quality of the inputs that children receive during English instruction. Moreover, if we talk about teaching pronunciation, the teacher should be a model to guarantee a good oral language context. Specifically, in phonological awareness instruction, “this training should include proper pronunciation of sounds in isolation and how to model blending and segmenting clearly and correctly” (Al Otaiba, Allor, Werfel & Clemens, 2016, p.17), so the teacher must be qualified and develop his/her phonological awareness ability. Adams et al., (2004) maintain “in order to build phonemic awareness in all children, classroom teachers should know a little about the structure of language, especially phonology” (p. 3). Therefore, trained teachers are needed to imply phonological awareness instruction in English, but also to guarantee quality foreign language learning.

Another aspect to consider is the type of activities and how they are presented to children. Especially, young children have a short attention span meaning that the instruction should be attractive to them. For phonological awareness training, Adams et al. (2004) state 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 instance, using songs, chants, games, books,

or puppets could be useful resources for presenting activities, because a child learns when he/she feels involved in the process, as Rius (2021) states *“l’infant aprén quan se sent involucrat activament en el procés, mentre fa, toca, crea i s’emociona”* (p.28). Children should perceive phonological awareness training as a way to play with the language, so the teacher’s responsibility is to find and plan activities in which they have fun while they are learning a new language. Furthermore, with phonological awareness training, apart from playing with the language, students should reflect upon the language and its different units. Layton & Deeny (2002) state “nursery rhymes, as well as other jingles and word-games, act as a trigger for raising phonological awareness to an explicit level” (p. 11). But, these resources use words as the main element of its meaning that students are exposed to vocabulary. Nation (2020) states that when kids are exposed to the vocabulary more often, it is easier for them to comprehend and recall the words. So, multiple encounters with the words can aid in the process of stimulating children’s phonological awareness. Also, the same author argues that “build repetition into a course by coming back to the same material at least four or five times, sometimes doing exactly the same activity again and sometimes varying it” (p. 7), increases vocabulary repetition and more exposition to the language. Furthermore, as Paivio’s dual coding theory (Paivio, 2010) states human cognition is divided into two processing systems: the visual one and the verbal one, so multimodal input plays an important role in English as a second language. For this reason, the vocabulary used to stimulate children’s phonological awareness should be presented also with visual support such as flashcards or pictures.

When implementing phonological awareness training in Early Childhood Education, we must consider that children on this stage are progressively getting ready to write and read in their first language, and until year 5 most of them do not read or write. For this reason, the introduction of a foreign language is done orally. Therefore, should all phonological awareness instruction include letters? or should instruction include no letters? Al Otaiba et al., (2016) comment that “the answer likely falls somewhere in between; that is, letter sound knowledge should be combined with phonological awareness instruction after a base of segmentation and blending skill is established” (p.16). So, both instructions are necessary to develop higher skills and abilities. However, it should be considered to start instruction without including letters and introducing them in further stages when they have acquired the alphabet principle of the first language. During the first years, phonological awareness instruction in a foreign language might be a sort of game with the language, in which children have fun while they discover new sounds and a new language.

### **3. Didactic proposal**

The practical part of this Final Year Project consisted of creating a book that would promote children's phonological awareness in English. For doing so, a didactic proposal was designed and formed by a book and follow-up activities based on the literature review exposed in the theoretical framework.

The didactic proposal is planned for the last year of Early Childhood Education, but it can also be used in lower grades or in the first grades of Primary Education, depending on which age English is introduced. However, it was initially created for the last year in Early Childhood Education because according to the current Catalan curriculum, if the sociolinguistic school context lets the school incorporate a first oral contact with a foreign language, it could be especially implemented in the last year of Early Childhood Education (Departament d'Educació de la Generalitat de Catalunya, 2023).

In the Appendices of this project, teachers will be able to find the teaching guide and the necessary materials for developing the didactic proposal. There is the book print version, the teaching guide, and the block of materials for the activities. In the teaching guide, teachers will have the instructions for reading the book, how to carry out the follow-up activities and how to organize the sessions.

#### **3.1. Process of the creation of the materials**

According to Yoshida (2016), "being able to hear the difference between sounds in a new language is as important as being able to produce the sounds" (p. 7). For this reason, learners should be able to perceive new sounds of the language to be able to produce them later. So, the creation of the materials for this didactic proposal was designed using resources where perception and also the production of the new sounds were part of it.

##### **3.1.1. Book**

The main resource of the didactic proposal is a book. When children are listening to a teacher reading a book they are training their hearing skills and perception of the language sounds. This is the reason why the main tool in this didactic proposal for stimulating English phonological awareness is a book. For creating it, two issues were considered, the first one was the choice of sounds and the other one was the structure of the book.

Regarding the first issue, “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.7). This ability does not come naturally especially in a foreign language, therefore it must be trained and learned. For designing phonological awareness material, a specific set of sounds should be chosen to start training this ability. Nevertheless, we might consider that when we learn a foreign language, the native language influences the process. If there is a previous establishment of L1, phonological patterns can influence and interfere with the establishment of L2 patterns (Flege, 1992). So, this influence of the first language triggers common difficulties shared by the speakers. In the theoretical framework, the main difficulties that Spanish/Catalan speakers have in English have been exposed, among them “learners find difficulties in differentiating between English vowels, especially where length is a part of the difference” (Swan & Smith, 2001, p.91). For this reason, the chosen sounds that appear in the book are the long English vowel sounds, /ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/ and /ɔ:/.

Secondly, to create the story of the book I was inspired by a classic children's book “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?”, written by Bill Martin Jr and illustrated by Eric Carle (1967). This book uses a repetitive structure that gives a rhythm to the story and contains a question and an answer. Adams et al. (2004) state that activities that involve rhythm, listening and sounds are appropriate for very young children to stimulate phonological awareness training. Then, I selected five main words that contain one of the long vowel sounds, for the /ɑ:/ sound the vowel sound in the word star, /ɜ:/ the vowel sound in the word bird, /i:/ the vowel sound in the word bee, /u:/ the vowel sound in the word moon and /ɔ:/ the vowel sound in the word fork. To expose children as much as possible to these new sounds, I decided that those words had to be the most repeated ones in the story, therefore they are part of the repetitive structure. Moreover, Spanish and Catalan speakers confuse long vowel sounds with other vowel sounds, as it happens with seat and sit because /i:/ and /I/ sounds correspond to their language sound /i/ (Swan & Smith, 2001), so the same question was repeated in two pages to contrast the different sound. On one page, the question ends with a word that contains the same vowel sound, but on the other page the question ends with a vowel sound that learners often confuse.

Finally, the text is accompanied by pictures which are an essential element for helping kids with comprehension because it brings two skills together at the same time. As Paivio's dual coding theory (Paivio, 2010) states that human cognition is divided into two processing systems: the visual one and the verbal one, so multimodal input plays an important role in English as a second language. First, on the page, there are two elements, which are the same ones that form the

question. For example, there is a bee and a tree and the question says: “Little bee, little bee are you behind the tree?”. Then, they have to lift the flap to find the answer, if it is affirmative the two elements contain the same long vowel sound, but on the other hand, if it is negative, they have different vowel sounds. Putting the same example, behind the flap the picture will represent a bee behind a tree, the answer will be “yees!” and the affirmative sentence “The bee is behind the tree”. Hence, the book is training children’s perception of long vowel sounds and stimulating their capacity to differentiate between English vowel sounds implicit in a story.

### 3.1.2. Teaching guide

In the same line as in the book, the follow-up activities of the teaching guide were designed to stimulate children’s perception, but also the production of the long vowel sounds. In total, six activities work as a complement material of the book. The first three activities are centred on perception because first, they have to include the new sounds in their *phonological filter*. As Yoshida (2016) explains “our brain develops a phonological filter that lets us hear the sounds of our own language very efficiently but “filters out” and ignores unfamiliar, unnecessary sounds” (p.7). The production of the new sounds is introduced progressively from activity 4, children start to repeat vocabulary and end up playing the game by saying out loud the words with the new sounds.

All the activities are created to be carried out with the whole group because a model is needed that guarantees a good oral language in a context, in this case the teacher should model the activities to provide a proper model of the pronunciation of sounds. It is not only important to develop perception skills for students, but also teaching perception is important to be able to hear how we produce the sound and how it is pronounced (Derwing & Munro, 2014). However, activities 5 and 6 (the last ones), can also be played in small groups once children know the game and have been exposed to the new sounds during the didactic proposal.

Children should perceive phonological awareness training as a way to play with the language, that is why the activities are sort of games such as a memory game, also a song and a tongue twister. As Layton & Deeny (2002) state “nursery rhymes, as well as other jingles and word-games, act as a trigger for raising phonological awareness to an explicit level” (p. 11). Moreover, children adopt an active role that guarantees they are learning as they feel involved in the activity. As Rius (2021) states “*l’infant aprén quan se sent involucrat activament en el procés, mentre fa, toca, crea i s’emociona*” (p.28).

To design the activities, I choose a list of vocabulary of 20 words, five for each long vowel sound. But half of them are from the book, so children in the activities are exposed to ten new words. Nation (2020) argues that by using vocabulary often, children are better able to comprehend and retain the words because they are more obvious to them. So, that is the reason why the vocabulary use in the didactic proposal is limited and repeated in most of the activities.

The activities are described in the teaching guide in appendix 2, it also involves a sample planning for developing the didactic proposal. It is structured in seven sessions, and as I have mentioned before the first activities are centered in perception and then production is included progressively. The sessions last about 25-30 minutes to guarantee a better attention since young children have a short attention span and they all start by reading the book.



## 4. Conclusions

The main idea behind this project was to design some materials to introduce very young learners to phonological awareness in English. There is little research on phonological awareness in a foreign language in Early Childhood Education, it is mainly done in the native language. However, the different studies present phonological awareness instruction as a tool that encourages children to play with the language while they discover new sounds and a new language. By doing so, it is important that the type of activities are attractive to very young children, for instance, those that contain rhyme, rhythm, listening, and sounds such as songs, chants, games, books, or puppets which seem to be adequate for introducing phonological awareness to such young EFL learners.

Moreover, it must be said that the quality of the language instructor is also an important factor that should be considered; the teacher develops an essential role in phonological awareness instruction as he/she becomes the linguistic model for their students. Finally, another aspect that should be mentioned is that Early Childhood Education students are exposed to the foreign language mostly orally; therefore, these programmes should introduce phonological awareness without including the written form of the words and progressively doing it in higher grades.

Furthermore, I would like to say that this final project has helped me relate concepts learnt in different courses during my degree. As a sample of this, phonological awareness was a topic only developed in subjects about the native language. On the other hand, in subjects about learning English as a foreign language, we have learnt about teaching pronunciation and the common difficulties shared by speakers from the same language. By relating those concepts, I have concluded that through phonological awareness it is possible to work on the influence that the mother tongue has on the learning of English.

Due to the lack of research and materials to implement phonological awareness programs in English at the early childhood stage, by designing this material I am sure I have contributed to provide Early Childhood Education teachers with a comprehensive and accessible resource based on the findings in the literature review. I applied the knowledge and experience gained during my academic degree to create this project. Therefore, I have been able to combine my roles as a researcher and as a future teacher of Early Childhood Education in order to enhance and offer children with high-quality education.

The material was designed for the last year of Early Childhood Education, but it can also be used in lower grades or in the first grades of Primary Education. In addition, the sounds worked in the book and in the follow-up activities came from a common difficulty among Spanish and Catalan speakers. It is true that nowadays in Spain, classes are multilingual and multicultural, and children have different native languages, and this means that they will develop other difficulties. This material can be used as an inspiration for creating more resources for English teachers to work on common difficulties while children are introduced to phonological awareness in the target language.

This Final Degree Project is just a proposal, it would be useful to carry it out with children in year 5 to see if it works in the same way as it was thought when it was created. While the didactic proposal is being implemented, some observations could be executed to observe how teachers develop and use the material to study what can be improved from the original version.

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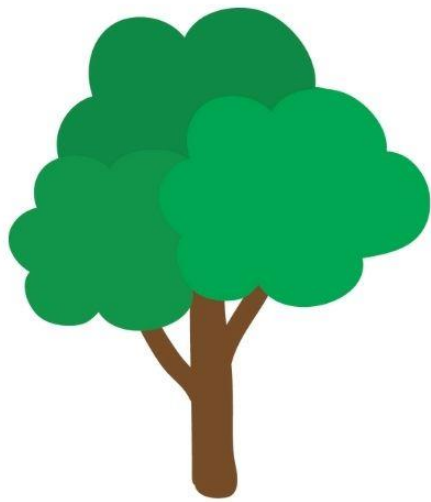
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## 6. Appendices

### 6.1. Appendix 1: Book

Here, you can find the [link](#) for the book *Little bee, little bee!* (print version).





Little BEE, little BEE  
are you



behind the TREE?

Lift the  
flap

Page 1

YEEES!

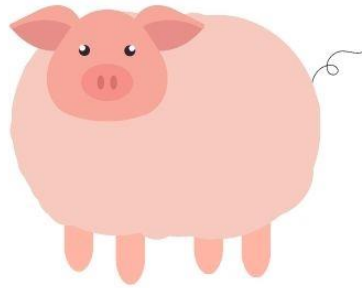


The BEE is behind  
the TREE

Little BEE, little BEE  
are you



behind the TREE?



Little BEE, little BEE  
are you

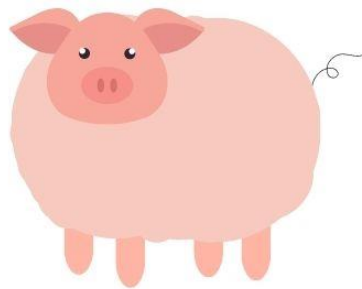


next to the PIG ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 2

NOOO!



The BEE is not  
next to the PIG

Little BEE, little BEE  
are you



next to the PIG ?





Round MOON, round MOON  
are you



beetwen BALLOONS ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 3

YEES!



The MOON is  
beetwen BALLOONS

Round MOON, round MOON  
are you



beetwen BALLOONS ?



Round MOON, round MOON  
are you



on the BOOKS ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 4

NOOO!



The MOON is not  
on the BOOKS

Round MOON, round MOON  
are you



on the BOOKS ?



Grey FORK, grey FORK  
are you



in the BOX ?

Page 5



The FORK is not  
in the BOX

Grey FORK, grey FORK  
are you



in the BOX ?



Grey FORK, grey FORK  
are you



behind a BALL ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 6



The FORK is  
behind the BALL

Grey FORK, grey FORK  
are you



behind a BALL ?



Green BIRD, green BIRD  
are you



on the SHIRT ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 7

YEEES!



The BIRD is  
on the SHIRT

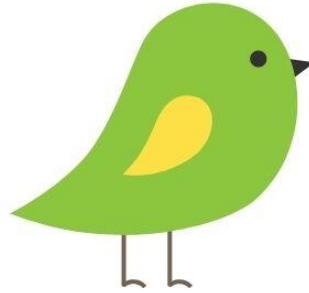
Green BIRD, green BIRD  
are you



on the SHIRT ?



Green BIRD, green BIRD  
are you



behind the SHIP ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 8



NOOO!

The BIRD is not  
behind the SHIP

Green BIRD, green BIRD  
are you



behind the SHIP ?



Bright STAR, bright STAR  
are you



next to the RAT ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 9

NOOO!

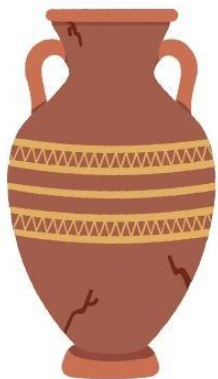


The STAR is not  
next to the RAT

Bright STAR, bright STAR  
are you



next to the RAT ?



Bright STAR, bright STAR  
are you



in the JAR ?

Lift the  
flap

Page 10



YEEES!

The STAR is  
in the JAR

Bright STAR, bright STAR  
are you



in the JAR ?



# TEACHING GUIDE

Little BEE,  
Little BEE!



Elisabet Ausió Mauri  
Final Degree Project  
Early Childhood Education  
UVic-UCC

## INTRODUCTION

### *Objectives*

The book *Little bee, little bee!* and the follow-up activities is a material designed to work on phonological awareness of vowel sounds in English. It starts with a basic requirement, to domain the vocabulary used in both materials, and it has two aims:

- To stimulate children's perception of the different lengths of the vowel sounds, especially the long ones
- To stimulate children's production of the long vowel sound

Phonological awareness is considered a metalinguistic ability, and it is the awareness that words can be separated into syllables and individual sounds, and the ability to execute mental operations on these units. This ability does not come naturally, which leads us to believe that it must be trained and learned. In addition, this ability is used to stimulate reading and writing acquisition, it helps students to be aware of the different sounds of the words but also to play and reflect upon language while they are analysing it.

Phonological awareness training has been mostly implemented in the first language of the students, and with a small representation in a foreign language. However, some studies evidence that phonological awareness skills help students with their reading, writing and vocabulary learning in native and foreign languages. But we might consider that when we learn a foreign language the native language influences the process. Moreover, there are several common difficulties shared by the speakers of the same first language. Spanish and Catalan speakers, among other difficulties, have troubles in differentiating between English vowels, especially where length is a part of the difference (Swan & Smith, 2001).

To sum up, this material is a tool to use with very young English learners to help them to stimulate perception of the different lengths of vowel sounds, especially the long sounds because they do not exist the Spanish/Catalan sound system. These sounds are /ɑ:/ as in star, /ɜ:/ as in bird, /i:/ as in bee, /u:/ as in moon, and /ɔ:/ as in fork. Apart from perceiving the different sounds, children will also produce them for acquiring new sounds that are necessary for learning the language.

## *Recipients*

The principal recipients of this material are children who are immersed in English language learning. It is initially addressed for students in the last year of Early Childhood Education (grade 5), it can also be used in lower grades or in the first grades of Primary Education, depending on which age English is introduced. It will help them to make a linguistic reflection about the length of the vowel sounds and distinguish between them.

## *Description of the materials*

**Teaching guide:** it is the material you are reading. It contains an introduction, a sample planning, and introductions for reading the book and developing the follow-up activities.

**Book:** the book used is titled *Little bee, little bee!*, it is the principal material of the didactic proposal. The activities are based on the sounds and part of the vocabulary presented in the book.

**Block of materials:** It contains exclusively the materials that you need for implementing the follow-up activities. In order to play with them, what will be suitable is to cut and laminate them to be able to reuse it in the different activities. In each page, it is indicated for which activity the material is for.

## SAMPLE PLANNING

The use of this material can follow the next sample planning, it is subjected to adapt or reorder any activity. The planning is divided into seven sessions, however all of them can be repeated as many times as it is necessary or depending on the acceptance of the students. Also, the words used in the activities are the same and come from the book, but there are also some new ones.

Session 1	Activity	Timing	Materials
1st	Reading "Little bee, little bee!"	10 minutes	Book
2nd	Animal sounds	10 minutes	Animal flashcards
3rd	Bird, tongue twister!	5 minutes	Bird flashcard

Session 2	Activity	Timing	Materials
1st	Reading "Little bee, little bee!"	10 minutes	Book
2nd	Hops on the train	10 minutes	Animal flashcards
3rd	Bird, tongue twister!	5 minutes	Bird flashcard

Session 3 and 4	Activity	Timing	Materials
1st	Reading "Little bee, little bee!"	5-10 minutes	Book
1st	Presenting Sound boxes (2 or 3 boxes for session)	20 minutes	5 boxes and objects

Session 5	Activity	Timing	Materials
1st	Reading "Little bee, little bee!"	5-10 minutes	Book
2nd	Sound boxes (to refresh which objects belongs to each box)	5 minutes	5 boxes and objects
3rd	Memory game	15 minutes	Memory cards

Session 6	Activity	Timing	Materials
1st	Reading "Little bee, little bee!"	5-10 minutes	Book
2nd	Sound boxes (to refresh which objects belongs to each box)	5 minutes	5 boxes and objects
3rd	Roll the dice	15 minutes	Memory cards and pictures' dice

Session 7	Activity	Timing	Materials
Optional	Reading the book or sound boxes	5-10 minutes	5 boxes and objects
Simultaneously	Memory game (small groups)	20 minutes	Memory cards
Simultaneously	Roll the dice (small groups)	20 minutes	Memory cards and pictures' dice

## INSTRUCTIONS FOR READING THE BOOK

The aim of the book *Little bee, little bee!* is to stimulate children's perception of the lengths of English vowel sounds. The sounds worked in it are /ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/, and /ɔ:/, which are sounds that students, as Spanish and Catalan speakers, could have difficulties to differentiate between them.

In the book there are five main words and pictures that are repeated several times. Each one has a long vowel sound, for /ɑ:/ sound a star, /ɜ:/ sound a bird, /i:/ sound a bee, /u:/ sound a moon, and /ɔ:/ sound a fork. Each page contains a question with one of these words and another one, and a flap that you have to lift to know the answer. Behind the flap, the picture gives the answer, but also it is written yes or no, and a sentence with the answer too. If the answer is affirmative, the two elements of the question have the same vowel sound, on the other hand if it is negative the elements do not contain the same vowel sound. As an example of this, the first question of the book is "Little **bee**, little **bee** are you behind the **tree**?", as the words in bold have the sound /i:/ the picture behind the flap represents the question, the answer is "yes" and the sentence says "The bee is behind the tree".

For the reading of the book, the most important aspect is to read with an appropriate pronunciation. It is recommended a pre-reading before doing it in class to give students a good model to perceive the different vowel sounds of the book. Before starting the book, the teacher should show the cover and read the title, also point to the bee and saying the word again. During the reading, the teacher should put prominence on to the vowel sound and have a clear articulation, repeating the answer more than once to expose children as much as possible to the words. After the reading, the teacher will ask students for each 5 main word with the question "Where was the ...?" and showing the flashcard to help them to understand the question, to give the answer the teacher will show again the page that contains it.

Finally, the book is going to be read several times meaning that students will progressively know the answer of each page. A more active role should be given to children by letting them participate during the reading. As a final recommendation, the book can be exposed in class where children can take it and read it when they want.

## INSTRUCTIONS FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

Here, you can find the instructions for developing the follow-up activities. The first two activities focus on stimulating children's perception of long vowel sounds, the production of these sounds is progressively introduced. Moreover, the vocabulary use come from the book and some new words that are presented in the activity 4 but appear in the activities 5 and 6.

### Activity 1: Animal Sounds

<b>Objective</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- To stimulate children's perception of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)</li></ul>
<b>Material</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Animal flashcards (material 1, block of materials)</li><li>- <a href="#">Listening</a></li></ul>
<b>Description</b> <p>Listening to the book, students will hear the different lengths of the vowels. This first activity wants to stimulate children's perception of the long vowel sounds. The sounds worked in this activity are /ɑ:/, /i:/, /u:/ and /ɔ:/. The activity will consist of listening to different animal sounds and match with the correct flashcard. Before starting the listening, the teacher will present the animals and the sounds they make by asking children if they know it and uttering clearly to them the animal sound in English. Then, he/she will give one flashcard to each child. During the listening, children will have to raise their flashcard when they hear the animal sound of it. After the first listening, children can change their flashcards and have a different animal. A variation of this activity can consist of moving their flashcard animal and reproducing the sound.</p> <p>The sounds of the animals are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- /ɑ:/ - BAA (sheep)</li><li>- /u:/ - MOO (cow)</li><li>- /ɔ:/ - ROAR (lion)</li><li>- /i:/ - HEE - HAW (donkey)</li></ul>



## Activity 2: Hops on the train!

### Objective

- To stimulate children's perception of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)

### Material

- Animal flashcards (material 1, block of materials)

### Description

This activity is a follow-up activity of the previous one. Children will work with the new sounds through animal onomatopoeia. The teacher will act as a train driver and start singing the song "Hops on the train". During the song, when children hear the animal sound of their flashcards, they have to hop on the train. The activity can be played several times, letting students sing the animal sound and having different flashcards. As teachers, we must ensure that they pay attention to different sounds.

The song used is adapted from the song "Animal Sound Song" (The Singing Walrus, 2017). Here, you can find the [link](#) to check the song to know the correct melody for singing in class and the lyrics to do it.

A little COW (repeat)

Hops on the train (repeat)

And she says MOO (repeat)

(together) I want to see the whole wide world!

A little SHEEP (repeat)

Hops on the train (repeat)

And she says BAA (repeat)

(together) I want to see the whole wide world!

A little LION (repeat)

Hops on the train (repeat)

And she says ROAR (repeat)

(together) I want to see the whole wide world!

A little DONKEY (repeat)

Hops on the train (repeat)

And she says HEE-HAA (repeat)

(together) I want to see the whole wide world!

### Activity 3: Bird, tongue twister!

**Objective**

- To stimulate children's perception /3:/ sound

**Material**

- Bird flashcard (material 2, block of materials)

**Description**

This activity is based on a tongue twister that says, "the first birds I heard were the blackbirds". The teacher will present the tongue twister by asking children to pay attention in order to guess how many times he/she says the word bird (while is being showed the bird flashcard). Then, after children guesses the answer, the teacher will repeat and raise up the flashcard every time the word is said. The same activity can be done more than once, and teacher can say two or three times in a row the tongue twister and children will guess it too.

## Activity 4: Sound boxes

### Objective

- To stimulate children's perception of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)
- To stimulate children's production of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)

### Material

- 5 boxes with a picture (material 3, block of materials)
- Objects from the list

### Description

This activity consists of training the perception of the long vowel sounds and start to produce words that contain those sounds. The teacher will bring a box and different objects; the final aim of the activity is to determine if each object goes inside the box. Each box might contain a picture that represents each long vowel sound according to the book, so for /i:/ box a bee, for the /u:/ box a moon, for the /ɔ:/ box a door, for the /ɜ:/ box a bird, and for the /ɑ:/ box a star. For example, if it is the /u:/ box there must be a moon stuck outside, and an object that can go inside is for example a balloon; on the other hand, an object that cannot go inside is a book.

First, the teacher will present the box by repeating several times the picture that represents the sound they are working with. Then, he/she will present the objects that belongs to that box repeating the new object and the picture of the box.

After presenting the box and the objects, he/she will take some other objects and mix them with previous ones, one by one will be said out loud and students will repeat and guess if it can be placed in the box or not. This activity can be done with all long vowel sound and repeated in different sessions.

As a variation when all the boxes have been presented, it can be done with more than one sound box, making the activity more difficult because they have to discriminate which box the object belongs to.

Here, there is a list of some objects for each box:

- Bee box: tree, sheep, key
- Moon box: balloon, wood, tool
- Fork box: horse, ball, door
- Bird box: shirt, circle, turtle
- Star box: jar, car, shark

## Activity 5: Memory game

### Objective

- To stimulate children's perception of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)
- To stimulate children's production of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)

### Material

- Memory cards (material 4, block of materials)

### Description

This activity consists of finding pairs according to the long vowel sounds. The teacher will bring the memory cards and will put them upside down. Children will face up two words and say them out loud to hear if they have the same vowel sound or not. If any child does not know the word in English, the teacher or any other student will help him/her to say it in English.

This game can be play in different sessions, and once they know how to play and most of the words, students can be separated into small groups and play by themselves. The vocabulary use is the same from the previous activity *Sound boxes*.

Moreover, the teacher can decide the difficulty level of the game, if they play with just two vowel sounds, it will be easier, but if they play with more vowel sounds, it will be more difficult.

The pictures for each long vowel sound are the following ones:

- /i:/ sound: bee, tree, sheep, key
- /u:/ sound: moon, balloon, wood, tool
- /ɔ:/ sound: fork, ball, door, horse
- /ɜ:/ sound: bird, shirt, circle, turtle
- /ɑ:/ sound: star, jar, car, shark

## Activity 6: Roll the dice

### Objective

- To stimulate children's perception of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)
- To stimulate children's production of the long vowel sounds (/ɑ:/, /ɜ:/, /i:/, /u:/, /ɔ:/)

### Material

- Memory cards (material 4, block of materials)
- Dice with pictures (material 5, block of materials)

### Description

This activity consists of finding a card with the same vowel sound as the face of the dice. The cards will be on the floor and facing up, children who are placed around the cards will throw the dice and find a card with the same sound as the dice picture. The child has to say the words of both pictures out loud, if she/he does not know the word in English, the teacher or any other student will help him/her to say it in English.

This game can be played in different sessions, and once they know how to play and most of the words, students can be separated into small groups and play by themselves. The vocabulary of the cards are the same ones used in the previous activities (*Sound boxes* and *Memory game*), so children are familiarized with the words.

The pictures for each long vowel sound are the following ones:

- /i:/ sound: bee, tree, sheep, key
- /u:/ sound: moon, balloon, wood, tool
- /ɔ:/ sound: fork, ball, door, horse
- /ɜ:/ sound: bird, shirt, circle, turtle
- /ɑ:/ sound: star, jar, car, shark

### 6.3. Appendix 3: Block of materials

Here, you can find the [link](#) for the block of materials (print version).

# BLOCK OF MATERIALS

Little BEE,  
Little BEE!



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