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THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE
EDUCATION IN SPAIN

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Abstract

One of the pillars of the Organic Law 8/2013 for the improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE) is the importance of families, teaching staff, educational centers, educational authorities and even society in the responsibility for the academic success of all the students as well as for the quality of the educational system. Families have the main responsibility for the education of children and the educational system has to rely on them and trust their decisions. According to this Organic Law, families will have to closely collaborate and commit themselves to participate in the daily work of their children and schools. But the role of teachers is still essential as it would be impossible for students to develop their capacities to the maximum extent or to get parents involved in their children's education without the commitment of teachers. Although the LOMCE takes into account the role of parents, not only in the learning of a foreign languages but also in the overall education of the pupil, the fact is participation on the part of parents in their children's foreign language learning process is rare in Spain. Parents entrust this teaching role exclusively to the schools, principally because in many cases they do not consider themselves to be adequately prepared to help their children in the learning of foreign languages. For the current presentation we rely on Spanish parents' responses to thirty-six survey questions about their commitment and participation in the foreign language process of their children.

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1. Introduction

The rapid social, economic and technological change presents new challenges for society and new and greater demands on its education system (Ministry of education, Culture and Sports, 2014). As this report states, “*Information and communication technologies have become of fundamental importance in the acquisition and reformulation of knowledge and will exert an increasing influence on the development of education, both in the school and in the family*” (2014, pp. 20-21) Social transformation and demographic changes (immigration, both parents working, single parents) make more efficient and practical forms of cooperation between parents and schools, necessary to succeed in educating children. The European Recommendation for Cooperation between Parents and Schools (COPASH, 2008) stresses the importance of the participation of parents, teachers and students as the basis for the school development and as a determining factor in the improvement of pupils’ performance. On the basis of scientific studies, they point out the growing importance of implementing the cooperation between what they call “the most important educational partners”. However, nowadays, the collaboration between parents and schools is limited in most cases to school festivals and trips or being representatives on the School Council. Although the European educational system legally regulates these forms of cooperation between parents and schools, the truth is that “*schools and parents appear to be entrapped in a “blaming game” in which the responsibility for school problems is reciprocally ascribed to the other side*” (Parreira do Amaral, Walther, & Litau, 2013, p.42). Teachers mention apathy, indifference and the lack of interest of parents as the main reasons which impede the interaction between families and schools and on the other hand, parents feel teachers see them as a threat to control and interfere with their lessons (Galván & Rincón, 2014).

In the case of Spain, parental participation in school education is a right, and at the same time, a basic obligation in democratic societies, but in the same way as in other European countries, the various comprehensive educational reforms have not been able to resolve the problem of school failure.

2. Foreign language education in Spain

The Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport (MECD) has published a study on the *Teaching of Foreign Languages in the Spanish Education system*, following the participation of the Spanish Network of Information on Education (REDIE) in the drawing up of the document Key Statistics on the Teaching of Languages in European Schools (2012) by Eurydice. As this study shows, the organic laws on education which have been approved since the 1990’s have brought about important advances with respect to the treatment of foreign languages in the Spanish Education system. With the Organic Law of General Order of the Education System (LOGSE) in 1990, its teaching extends from Primary Education up to Baccalaureate; The Organic Law of Education (LOE) of 2006 established “linguistic communication” as one of the fundamental skills which the pupil must acquire both with regard to official languages and foreign languages and introduces the teaching of the latter from the second cycle of Infant Education. Finally, the Organic Law for the improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE) of 2013 includes as one of its principles, the fostering of multilingualism.

The MECD and the autonomous regional educational administrations have worked together to improve the learning of foreign languages and to expand the programmes of integrated learning contents

and foreign languages, the forerunner of which was the Bilingual Programme MECD/British Council. This was the first Spanish-English integrated curriculum project at school level and was put into action in Spain in 1996.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was set up in more than half of the Educational Administrations in order to define the level of knowledge which is necessary to attain in each phase of learning, and practically every Educational Administration adopted the use of the European Portfolio of Languages in the schools and in the different stages of education.

With respect to the study of the first foreign language, this varied from one Autonomous Community to another. In general, the recommendation is to begin in the second cycle of Infant Education; however, three different situations are taken into consideration:

- The study of the Foreign language begins in the first course of the second cycle of Infant Education (Balears, Cantabria, Castilla la Mancha, Castilla y León, Comunidad Valenciana, Extremadura, Galicia, Madrid, Murcia, Navarra, País Vasco, La Rioja, Ceuta y Melilla).
- It is compulsory in the second course of the second cycle of Infant Education (Asturias y Canarias).
- Although the option to introduce the study of a foreign language exists in the second cycle of Infant Education, it is not compulsory until Primary Education (only in Andalucía and Cataluña).

The weekly lesson time in schools increases as the pupil progresses through the educational system and may increase from two sessions of approximately 40 minutes in Infant Education up to 5 hours in Primary Education. In all stages of education, the first foreign language which is taught is English. In the third cycle of Primary Education a second foreign language is also offered as optional, being usually French, German or Portuguese. It is also offered with a weekly teaching input of 1 or 2 hours.

The teaching qualification which is required of teachers is that of *Maestro en Educación Infantil o Primaria* (Teacher of Infant or Primary Education) stating the specialism of the qualification. It is also necessary to have attained a B2 level of the MECERL, although some public administrations demand higher levels. With regard to the ongoing training of teachers, courses and seminars are organised, usually in the *Centros de Profesores y Recursos* (CPR) (Teacher Training Centres)

In addition to the teachers, there are other figures who are involved in the teaching of foreign languages such as that of the foreign language assistant. Most Autonomous Communities give priority in their official curricula to one or more communicative skills. In general, the oral skills (listening comprehension, oral interaction and oral expression) are given priority over the written skills (reading comprehension and written expression) in Infant and Primary Education stages. It is especially at the stage of Infant Education that the oral skills are given much more importance than written skills.

3. Parents' role in education in Spain

All educational centres in Spain have at least two bodies, the Schools Council and the Faculty. The main interested parties in education, teachers, parents and students are represented on the Schools Council which can be considered as the main communication channel between school and society. It is the main school governing body and it is not merely advisory, but also makes decisions about the organization of schools in its academic, administrative and economic aspects. School councils are composed of the school

Head (who has much more power to make decisions with the LOMCE), who acts as the chairperson, the Director of Studies, a town council representative, a number of teachers elected by the members of the teaching staff, pupils' parents from among the parents, pupils elected from those who attend schools; members of the administrative and services personnel and the school's secretary who acts as the council's secretary and who has voice but not vote in the decision making process. The specific number of students, teacher and parents representatives on the School Council depends on the size of the school. It deals with many administrative issues and bureaucracy, but it also helps to establish stronger links between schools and families.

The participation of parents and students in the education system is not merely limited to school councils. There are also students' and parents' associations through which they can participate in school life.

There are also over 150 projects of Learning Communities in Pre-school and Primary Education in Spain. Learning Communities is a project which is based on international educational experiences and whose principal aim is the participation of family and community members. It has been developed in various Spanish schools with very positive results. The Learning Communities Project proposes a model of schooling in which parents, teachers, community members, volunteers and students work together in the school to improve education or help to solve problems such as pupil failure rates. The project involves all the community in the educational process creating spaces for volunteer participation either in specific educational activities (interactive library, digital room, storyteller, family courses), in the classroom (interactive groups) or even in the management of the school. Both the school and its environment are included in an integral participative and continuing educational process.

Classes are organized in interactive groups in which parents, college students, retired teachers, grandparents or even the more proficient students volunteer to help students to attain the highest learning objectives. Interactive groups are an inclusive and dialogic type of classroom organization and student grouping (INCLUDED). Having a community volunteer in a group will allow the teacher to manage the overall classroom dynamics while students are working or can even allow the volunteer to become an extra support in one of the groups.

The results of various educational projects show that the Educational Centres which carry out successful practices favour educational participation, which leads to an improve coordination between home and school, reduces academic failure and improves the environment in which the educational centre is situated. However, some teachers are reluctant to let parents participate in their classes, as they consider their participation to be a threat (Galván & Rincón, 2014).

4. Problem Statement

Although the LOMCE takes into account the role of parents and the family, not only in the learning of a foreign language but also in the overall education of the pupil, the fact is that participation on the part of the parents in their children's foreign language learning process is very rare in Spain. Parents entrust the teaching role exclusively to the schools, principally because in many cases they do not consider themselves to be adequately prepared to help their children in the learning of foreign languages.

5. Research Questions

Our research questions cover three main fields of study:

5.1. Parents' role in early foreign education

What is the role of parents in early foreign language education according to official legislation and documents in Spain? How is this realized in practice?

5.2. Parental practice in early foreign language education

Parents as decision makers: What kind of objectives do they have? What is the extent of their involvement and influence? What are parents' concerns with regard to their child's/children's early foreign language education? What practices support parental involvement in early foreign language education?

5.3. Parent-teacher interaction in early foreign language education

Which ways of communication between parents and schools are more common in Spain? What ways of communication between parents and schools do parents find most effective in Spain?

6. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present study is to establish the extent of the involvement of parents in early foreign language education. To discover whether they consider themselves adequately prepared to help their children in the learning of foreign languages and if not, to discover the barriers that prevent the accomplishment of this target.

Apart from that, one of our main concerns is to get to know the degree of parent-teacher interaction in early foreign language education, what they expect from them, how they perceive the foreign language teaching and learning process in itself and above all, their tips to improve the acquisition of the foreign language.

7. Research Methods

A quantitative study was carried out with a total of 81 questionnaires from parents of Primary Schools students, in state and state supported private schools in rural and urban areas of the province of Badajoz. Each questionnaire consisted of 36 items divided into two parts. The first five items considered personal data and questions about parents' academic background and level of English. The second part consisted of 31 items, on a decreasing Likert scale, about foreign language proficiency and foreign language learning at schools (8 items); aims of foreign language learning at school (4 items); school and home perspectives into foreign language teaching at primary schools (8 items); foreign languages at home and in free time (11 items).

The study also provides a qualitative analysis based on 3 open-ended questions about parental practice in early foreign language education, during the school term and in their free time, apart from a final question on their expectations and opinion about foreign language learning.

Analysis of data has been processed using the spreadsheet programme Excel 2010.

8. Findings

The largest group of our participants is made up of women (70.37%). With regard to their academic background, more than half, 59, 26%, of participants have qualified from university, 27, 16% graduated with a baccalaureate degree, 8,64% finished Compulsory Secondary Education and the smallest group, 1,23%, finished Primary Education.

8.1. Foreign language proficiency and foreign language learning at schools

Almost all the participants (80,25%) recognize the importance of knowing foreign languages. Only a quarter of the parents (25,93%) think that the importance of foreign language skills is already overemphasized these days. Half of the parents (51, 85%) value their own foreign language skills, although almost a quarter of them acknowledge having low or no proficiency in foreign languages. A considerable number of parents (66, 67%) have not studied foreign languages after their own school and study years, but surprisingly, almost all the participants (85, 19%) are aware of how foreign language teaching at school has changed since their own school years.

8.2. Aims of foreign language learning at school

The largest group of our participants believe that the aim of foreign language learning is excellent language proficiency (82, 71%) and functional language skills for everyday life (93, 83%). They give greater priority to the interest in language learning (80, 25%) to foreign language learning just to get good grades on the certificate (18%). It is worth stressing that 23% of parents chose the option “indifferent” when faced with this last statement.

8.3. School and home perspectives into foreign language teaching at primary schools

Only 3,70% of the parents participating in our study totally agree with the fact that foreign language teaching at school is sufficient to develop their children’s language proficiency (8,64% agree to some extent). The same feeling is also reflected in the open-ended questions when we ask parents to describe how they support their children in foreign language study and 24 parents out of 81 do not answer this question, while 20 of them state that they need the help of private teachers to help their children with their homework. More than half of the parents (51, 85%) say they are aware of how foreign languages are taught to their children at school. However, almost 70% wished that school would tell them more about the way foreign languages are being taught nowadays. When questioned about their participation when the school arranges occasions (parents’ evenings, etc.) which deal with foreign language teaching, 35% of the parents recognize they don’t participate at all, 12% of them do not answer this question, while 30% join these activities, at least sometimes. More than 20% chose again the option “indifferent”. They blame teachers again, because more than 35% of parents state that their child’s foreign language teacher has never told them how they can support their children’s language study.

8.4. Foreign languages at home and in free time

More than half the participants (53, 09%) usually talk to their children about their foreign language studies at school and a considerable number (83, 95%) are acquainted themselves with their child's foreign language materials and the majority of parents (94,97%) assure that their child does his/her foreign language home tasks. Although 54,32% of the parents consider their foreign language skills are too limited to support their children in their foreign language studies, only 20% claim they do not have time to get involved in that support. A high proportion of parents (28, 4%) chose the option "indifferent" when being asked if their children were keen on foreign language study, and only 17, 29% stated they were not. On the other hand, answers change dramatically when they are questioned about foreign language learning and free time. 30, 86% of the parents recognize that they never help their children in foreign language activities in their free time, while 53,09% of the parents support their children in their foreign language studies at school, only 39,5% help them in activities in their free time.

8.5. Qualitative analysis of open-ended questions

- In the first two open-ended questions, we ask participants to describe in their own words how they support their child in foreign language study and in foreign language activities outside schools. As we have already mentioned, 24 parents did not answer the first question and 39 out of 81 did not add anything to the second description. It's necessary to point out that 20 parents say they need the help of private teachers either because their level in foreign language proficiency is very limited or because they consider teachers' proficiency on foreign languages is also limited on practical and functional skills in some cases. Many parents criticize that teachers stick too much to grammar and theory and written skills, but they are not fluent in foreign languages. This is one of the reasons why they have to turn to native speakers in many cases.

- Parents' support in foreign languages studies can be summed up in coloring cards, singing songs and rhymes from the internet in English, translating vocabulary into English or Spanish or watching videos and cartoons in English.

As to the third question, in which parents are asked about their hopes and wishes to language teaching and learning and teachers, 30 out of 81 do not add any remarks to it. Surprisingly, even though we have not included any questions about bilingual projects in our questionnaires, 8 of the participants (P 7,11,12,15,51,54,55 and 67) claim that bilingual programmes create social inequalities among the children (P11) and are exhausting and demotivating as well as segregative (P7), that they give greater importance to the foreign language to the detriment of the maternal language, and fundamental subjects such as mathematics, sciences and Spanish language (*"They are giving greater importance to the teaching of the foreign language than to the maternal language... and I see that pupils neglect areas such as language or mathematics to be able to get ahead with English"* (P11)). They also complain that they do not function as real bilingual centres, (*"I think that the bilinguism which the schools proclaim is not bilinguism, There is a lot of theory but little practice"* P 55). More than a quarter of the participants in the study consider that it is necessary to strengthen listening and speaking skills and demand quality foreign language education claiming the teaching is excessively theoretical. They also claim that the teachers who impart foreign language at primary level do not dominate the language and in many cases are not sufficiently proficient to

teach.it (“ I would demand more from language teachers” (P 31); “ I dont think the teachers are sufficiently prepared to teach the language” (P41) ;“that the teachers be qualified” (P60)

9. Conclusion

In the light of official documents, parents are not obliged to be involved in their child’s early foreign language education. Starting from the pre-primary level, education providers are obliged to initiate cooperation but it is up to the parents to take up the offer. At the theoretical level, parents are invited and encouraged to participate in, for example, the decision making regarding the language selection in the school but many Spanish parents do not trust the schools and teachers to educate their child without specific need for parental involvement and private tutors. The education system is not regarded as highly reliable in providing functional language skills needed for further studies and everyday life. The general feeling is that teachers are not sufficiently prepared for language teaching is an aspect that should be influencing teacher training.

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