

Introducing English in Preschool Education in Greece: An Overview of the EAN Project

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The Asian Conference on Education 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Following the 21st century model of creating classrooms that respond to society's plurilingualism and multiculturalism, English as a foreign language has been introduced in numerous European countries, as well as worldwide, in numerous preschools (Baïdak et al., 2017; Alexiou, 2020). Within this scope, integrating English as a foreign language in all Greek preschools is realised as of September 2021 through the EAN project (2021-2022). The project supports teachers' work through developmentally suitable soft CLIL educational scenarios that relate to the New Preschool Curriculum (Penderi et al, 2021) in Greece. This innovation does not only reflect international practices but also advances them both in the context of early foreign language learning and in relation to teacher training and support. Teacher training addressed both to in-service EFL teachers and preschool teachers is one of the main pillars of the EAN project and the positive impact of the EAN training scheme on teachers' self-efficacy has been found statistically significant. Monitoring and supervising the introduction of the English language in preschools as well as collecting evidence from all the key stakeholders are also paramount in this process. One of the main innovations has been the effort to cultivate a culture of cooperation between the teachers, contributing to the children's formation of a positive attitude towards languages. Important parameters are also children's development of attitudes, soft skills and pedagogical values as well as the promotion of intercultural competence. The EAN Project caters for very young children's multilateral education as well as their holistic development and presents a paradigm shift in EFL and preschool educational practices.

Keywords: EAN Project, English in Preschool, Teacher Training, Educational Material

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Introduction

Globally, as well as in many European countries, the idea of introducing a foreign language in preschool education has been long realised (Alexiou, 2020; European Commission, 2014). Based on the notion of developing communication and intercultural skills, the introduction of any additional language in the early years of education prepares children for the reality of the multicultural and plurilingual 21st century (Baidak, et al., 2017; European Commission, 2014).

The past school year, an innovative educational reform has taken place in Greece; the English language has been introduced in all Greek state preschools through the ‘EAN’ Project, or else “Teacher Training for the Introduction of English in Preschool Education”, (Code: MIS 5093563) within the context of OP “Human Resources Development, Education and Lifelong Learning 2014-2020”. The EAN Project has been responsible to support the introduction of the English language in Greek state preschools across the country.

The leading institution responsible for the design, organisation and coordination of the programme is the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (AUTH), Greece. There are two partner institutions involved, the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NKUA) and the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP). Therefore, an interdisciplinary team has been formed, comprising university faculty members, and special teaching staff, technical personnel, researchers, and external collaborators.

Main aims of the EAN Project

The EAN Project is realised within an innovative initiative in the context of the Greek educational system reforms, following the priorities set by the educational policy, focusing on upgrading this system at all levels of education.

Within the EAN Project, teacher training sessions have been developed and carried out, as well as methodologically and age-appropriate educational material are created in order to assist teachers in their new and unexplored task. The EAN Project also closely supported and monitored the process via collecting qualitative and quantitative data from all key stakeholders, such as English language and preschool teachers, Education Advisors and parents. Moreover, the learning outcomes of preschool children have also been investigated. Additionally, school visits have been conducted across the country and data were collected through classroom observations. In order to support and provide guidance to all those involved, and anyone who might be interested, an open-to-all website, the EAN Educational Portal has been developed. The EAN Educational Portal hosts general information about the EAN Project as well as specific information for each sub-project, along with the educational material. All data gathered during the past year concur that the introduction of the English language in the Greek preschools has been highly beneficial not only to the children, but to teachers as well, since they have gained useful knowledge which has made them more powerful educators.

The EAN Educational Portal

Based on the aims, the EAN AUTH team has created an open-to-all Educational Portal (www.ean.auth.gr), both in Greek and in English. This portal provides useful information to anyone who might be interested in the EAN Project, but also valuable guidelines to teachers

and parents involved in this educational reformation. Additionally, the EAN Educational Portal also includes information regarding the systematic monitoring process of the Project as well as the training programme regarding teachers and Education Advisors of the two specialisms.

Furthermore, the educational material is also included in the portal, along with digital tools and online resources, as well as suggested TPR classroom activities appropriate for very young learners. Moreover, relevant publications are also provided on the website. Information, study material and photographic material of the seminars and conferences held within the context of the EAN Project are also posted on the EAN Educational Portal. Since the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki has been responsible for the creation of this website, the aim is to maintain the provision of information and include up to date research related to English in preschool education and a major goal is to ensure the sustainability of the EAN Project. To this aim, a recent addition has been the activities and educational scenarios created by undergraduate and postgraduate students of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, School of English.

So far, the EAN Educational Portal has received 365.713 visits by 38.134 users. Most users have accessed the tabs related to the educational material, such as the scenarios and additional supportive material, and the general description of the programme. More specifically 37.000 Greek users have accessed the EAN site while other users come from the US, the Netherlands, Cyprus, Brazil, and more.

The aim of the EAN Educational Portal, which will remain open to all and will be enhanced even after the end of the funded research programme, is to support, inform and inspire anyone who might be interested in this educational reform, setting an example and hoping for future cooperation and projects carried out with other countries interested in this particular field of study.

The EAN Training Programme

As far as the training programme is concerned, this was developed in the form of an asynchronous scheme for English language and preschool teachers, along with EFL and preschool Education Advisors. The particular asynchronous training programme has been 24 hours in duration, and it was divided into 8 thematic modules. More than 18.000 EFL and preschool teachers benefited from this training programme. The training material has been developed by the EAN AUTH team and the training was realised via the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) platform, in the form of a MOOC training course.

In addition to this training programme, 70 Education Advisors of the two specialisms have received another 48 hours of synchronous and asynchronous training, particularly designed to support them in mentoring and guiding the EFL and preschool teachers. The main aim of this training programme has been to assist teachers in developing the necessary skills, as well as knowledge and attitudes in order to successfully integrate the activities in the English language into the preschool curriculum. The National and Kapodistrian University of Athens (NUKA) EAN team has developed the material for the Education Advisors' additional training.

The 24-hour asynchronous training programme developed by the EAN AUTH team has been evaluated by all the teachers and Education Advisors involved. Their evaluation has

underlined the necessity of this particular training scheme as well as the appropriacy of the methodology adopted. The teachers also positively commented on the interactive model adopted and evaluated the training as highly interesting and useful. Moreover, the feedback received concerning the technical issues of the training platform were also positive, as the trainees characterised the platform as easy to navigate and user-friendly. Positive evaluation has received the additional 48-hour training programme developed for the Education Advisors of the two specialisms as well.

Supporting and monitoring the EAN Project

Another aim of the EAN Project, as mentioned above, has been to offer support through systematically monitoring and supervising the implementation of English in preschools. Hence, school visits were carried out within the past academic year (2021-2022) and data was collected from 19 preschools all over Greece. More specifically, the EAN AUTH team undertook the task of visiting those schools and observing the classes during the time when the activities in English were taking place.

This process was pivotal, while the evidence collected from preschool classroom shed light on information which has been necessary and decisive for the formative assessment of the programme. More specifically, during these visits, the EAN AUTH research team was able to identify the high level of children participation during the activities in the English language as well as the great extent to which the teachers have used the EAN educational scenarios along with various techniques, methods, and materials they have incorporated. Moreover, information on the positive aspects of cooperation between the English and the preschool teacher have also been reported, supporting the value of the cooperative teaching model introduced by the EAN Project.

While visiting the preschools, albeit these were not part of any sub-project of EAN, the children's learning outcomes were also investigated. The high level of research interest on this aspect of the implementation of English in Greek state preschools has been the impetus for gathering data on children's linguistic, cognitive, cultural and socio-emotional outcomes. The data were collected by 84 preschoolers across the country, using tools which are appropriate for the particular age.

More specifically, Piclex (Alexiou, 2020) was used to measure linguistic gains and the results clearly indicate that childrens' language repertoire of preschool children was broadened. As far as the cognitive outcomes are concerned, YLAT (Alexiou, 2005) was employed. With regard to YLAT, the children did very well, particularly in some parts related to memory while children's scores on YLAT have affected their scores in Piclex highlighting the positive relationship of cognition and language. In order to investigate the socio-emotional outcomes of preschoolers, an adaptation of the Berkeley Puppet Interview protocol (Ablow et al. 1999) was used. During this testing procedure, which seemed as a game for children, the preschoolers expressed their enthusiasm for the new language (English in this case) and the activities taking place in their classroom, as well as their positive feelings related to different cultures and civilizations. As it is apparent therefore, measuring the learning outcomes of preschool children, in relation to the implementation of English in preschools highlighted the beneficial role of introducing a foreign language at this early age, taking into account the holistic development of children.

Whitin the systematic monitoring of the EAN Project, the investigation of all key stakeholders' perceptions regarding this educational reform was also important. This has been fundamental since perceptions are related to the practices implemented by teachers (OECD, 2009). The aim has been to investigate how teachers and Education Advisors of the two specialisms as well as parents have experienced the horizontal implementation of English in preschool education the past school year. Particularly, data were collected by more than 13.000 stakeholders. Generally, all participants exhibited positive perceptions regarding English in preschool, and the challenges (mainly practical issues) some of the participants faced did not seem to discourage them. The specific research design enabled the EAN team to monitor the progress of the programme and the findings have contributed significantly to the formative assessment of the Project. Moreover, the particular findings were taken into account in later stages of the EAN Project, making sure that all stakeholders were able to receive the necessary support and guidance during this educational innovation.

Besides the quantitative data collected by the key stakeholders, a series of focus group interviews have been conducted to gather more insightful information. More specifically, 18 focus groups were created and the participants were teachers of the two specialisms, Education Advisors and parents whose children were attending preschool. During these hourly interviews, the participants focused on the benefits of the introduction of the English language in preschool, as these have been apparent in children, as well as themselves as teachers. They also mentioned the great amount of support and guidance they have received by both the training session and the educational material hosted on the EAN Educational Portal. Any challenges they have faced had to do with lack of equipment, such as computers and projectors and administrative aspects, such as the preschool schedule. More importantly, they have also acknowledged and discussed the inspiring cooperation developed between English language and preschool teachers, which many times expanded from the classroom environment to a personal level.

The EAN Educational Scenarios

Another main aim of the EAN Project has been to provide teachers with developmentally and methodologically appropriate material for the implementation of English in preschools. In this context, the EAN Educational Scenarios were developed by the EAN AUTH team. The EAN scenarios reflect the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach, since it is supported to be the most appropriate for such young learners. The scenarios also adopt the interdisciplinary approach and are in line with the New Preschool Curriculum (2021) in Greece. Most importantly however, the EAN Educational Scenarios take into consideration the developmental characteristics of preschool aged children, following the appropriate pedagogical practices and incorporating relevant and most updated foreign language methodologies.

The particular material is indicative, and they are developed in order not to provide teachers with ready-made recipes but to inspire them on creating their own scenarios and activities instead. Additionally, the scenarios are flexible, in the sense that teachers can decide, based on the dynamics of the classroom and previous knowledge of the children, which and how many activities can actually be implemented in their classroom. Most importantly though, the scenarios create a meaningful learning framework by ensuring purposeful learning in order for the activities in English not to function as a separate subject but to be naturally incorporated in the preschool curriculum. This has been achieved through the use of an

English-speaking puppet, Kiki the koala in this case, that children can relate to and find a reason to communicate in another language.

There are more than 30 EAN Educational Scenarios which are divided into five thematic categories (Myself and others, Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer), following the structure of the thematic units employed in preschools. These educational scenarios contain more than 150 activities, and each scenario is complemented with multimodal material, such as flashcards, songs, and games. To be precise, 15 songs, 19 digital games and 185 flashcards were created in order to accompany the scenarios. Generally, short poems, stories, arts and crafts, realia, board games and puzzles are incorporated in the learning process. All these are material that are related to playful learning which ensures and enhances the holistic development of preschoolers. Special emphasis is placed on the development of oral skills through multisensory activities while it is clearly stated that children are expected to produce written language at this stage.

Besides the scenarios and the accompanying multimodal material, a bank of supportive material has also been developed. These include ideas for activities that can be incorporated within thematic categories, as presented in the “EAN Treasure Chest” along with suggestions of stories and songs that also fit into each thematic category. In addition to these, a bank of digital resources and online tools (websites) as well as TPR activities and games to be used in the preschool classroom are also available to teachers. The educational materials developed are available on the EAN site (<https://ean.auth.gr/en/ean-educational-material/>).

The educational material developed by the EAN AUTH team have been evaluated in order to make any necessary changes and adaptations that would better support and assist teachers in their work. The vast majority of the evaluations collected point out that the supportive material of the scenarios (such as songs, flashcards and digital games) are appropriate for the particular age (91%) and that the scenarios are fully informative (100%). Moreover, the scenarios were praised for their innovation (73%), the cooperative teaching model between the teachers of the two specialisms (77%) and the clarity of the objectives set (95%). The teachers who have evaluated the educational material also recognised the appropriacy of the methodology followed (95%) and highlighted that the EAN scenarios are in line with the New Preschool Curriculum (100%). What the teachers unanimously pointed out was the need for more educational scenarios that they can draw from which was realized by the end of the project.

Kiki the Koala: The puppet-mascot

As previously mentioned, in order for the English language to be introduced in Greek preschools in an effective, playful, natural and age-appropriate way, a mascot was used. Research has shown that mascots and puppets when used as educational tools offer multiple benefits. Through their colourful appearance and engaging personalities, they establish a positive, stress-free atmosphere in the classroom, resulting in better communication opportunities and enhanced creativity (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019). At the same time, they can foster acceptance and understanding, as well as a mentality of cooperation among learners, since the latter are offered the opportunity to adopt new perspectives as they play and engage with the puppet (Kröger & Nupponen, 2019).

In this case, Kiki the koala (see Figure 1) became the puppet-mascot of the EAN project responsible for introducing preschool children to the English language. Kiki is a cute koala

from Australia who speaks only English and becomes the link connecting children's in-class experiences with the outside world and the ways in which this new language can be used. The choice of a koala as a mascot was not coincidental. This particular exotic animal has a direct connection to Australia, an English-speaking country with approximately one million Greek expatriates. Therefore, it is likely that many children have relatives there and thus connections are made. By using this particular mascot, which refers to another culture, a need is created and there is a purpose in the communication between the mascot and the children.

More specifically, with the help of the English teacher who introduces children to Kiki, the children are encouraged to communicate with her and establish rapport using the target culture as much as possible. At the same time, Kiki acts as a representative and an agent of the target culture and offers children the opportunity to learn about foreign customs and traditions, compare them to their own, and thus develop a multicultural perspective towards learning in general and foreign language education in specific.

During the activities in the English language, Kiki is not presented as a prop but rather as an integral part of the learning experience, being responsible to introduce each new thematic area, topic, or activity for the children to engage with using the English language. The children are introduced to her on the very first day, while the English teachers are given a detailed indicative background of Kiki's family, friends, her hobbies, preferences, and pet peeves. As the school year progresses and the preschool children become more and more familiar not only with the new language but also with the new teacher, the latter can choose the extent to which Kiki's presence is needed, thus adapting their activities accordingly.

Finally, as it is the case with all aspects of the EAN project, the opinions and feedback of those directly involved in and affected by the reform were highly valued. In this case, the children were the ones who were encouraged to choose the best Kiki among a total of 9 images given to them (see Figure 2). A number of children from different schools decided on the most beautiful of the koalas, the one that they considered to have the most attractive colours and, finally, the one that they would like to be friends with in order for the "winner" Kiki to gain the title of the mascot of the project.

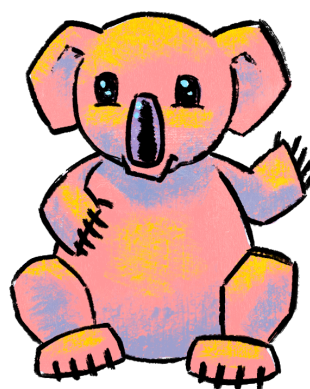


Figure 1: Kiki the Koala



Figure 2: Deciding on the best version of “Kiki the Koala”

The EAN model of teacher cooperation

One of the main innovations introduced by the EAN Project has been the teaching model adopted. For this initiative teachers of the two specialisms, namely the English language and the preschool teachers, have been brought together and were encouraged to cooperate during all stages of the learning process. The close cooperation between teachers while planning, conducting, and assessing the implementation of the activities in English is crucial for the successful introduction of the English language in preschool education. Along with the cooperation between teachers, the frequent communication and cooperation with the parents/guardians of preschool children is also important, in order to ensure that they can support children at home and enhance their experience with the new language.

Conclusion

The introduction of the English language in preschool education in Greece has been realised through the EAN Project which is responsible for organizing, supporting and monitoring this innovative educational reform. The interdisciplinary EAN team has catered for the training of teachers and Education Advisors as well as the rest of the key stakeholders, such as parents and children. Through the specifically designed training sessions, seminars and conferences held, teachers were able to gain all the necessary knowledge in order to undertake this innovative task. The educational material developed was of the utmost importance, as it provided support and inspiration to teachers involved in the learning process. The data collected throughout this year underline the value and importance of introducing a foreign language in preschool education, and benefits have been found for both teachers and children. Indeed, as it has been found during the school visits carried out, there are several learning gains apparent in children’s linguistic, cognitive and socio-emotional learning outcomes.

The EAN Project has systematically and carefully taken all the necessary steps in order to make sure that the English language in preschool has a theoretically and methodologically appropriate basis that ensures the developmental and pedagogical appropriacy in preschool education. The aim has always been to support the important role of preschool education and therefore to enhance the qualitative learning outcomes related to children’s holistic development. Therefore, the fact that the philosophy of the EAN Project is in line with the New Preschool Curriculum (Penderi et al, 2021) is of paramount importance for the sustainability and continuity of this educational reform.

The material developed by the EAN team has been translated and adapted from Greek to English in order to respond to the needs of the global educational community, setting the steppingstone for this educational innovation to be shared universally through the EAN Educational Portal. The ultimate goal of the EAN Project is to function as an example and landmark for foreign language learning in early years.

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