

Chapter 19


The English Corner as a Catalyst for Learning Languages in Plurilingual Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the use of the English Corner as a valuable catalyst to promote oral skills and language learning in plurilingual contexts at primary school level. The sample took place in two state-funded schools located in A Coruña (North-Western Spain) with 288 students aged from 8 to 12 years. This study aims at answering the following research questions: 1) How do primary school participants in this research consider the potential of EC to develop their oral comprehension and production English skills? 2) Does the English Corner environment foster more confidence to speak than the ordinary English classroom? An original questionnaire with a total of seven questions was designed by the authors to analyse data and give answer to the RQs. Results show that the English Corner seems to be the ideal place to develop their oral skills and it also fosters more confidence to speak foreign languages among participants.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to demonstrate that the English Corner (EC) may function as a beneficial catalyst to promote oral skills and language learning in plurilingual contexts at a Primary School level of education. The EC, as the name suggests, is a small room or quiet area on the school premises which has been decorated to give an English atmosphere. It may have pictures, posters, books, leaflets, *realia* or

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anything else which can be useful to assist in the English teaching and learning process. There can be all sorts of board games, cards, stories and books, all with the aim of encouraging informal conversation between the English Language Assistant (ELA) and the students. Therefore, English Corners are run by the ELAs and are usually organised in groups of three students. *A priori*, it is considered that the small group maximises the possibility of participation and, at the same time, promotes the students' confidence in communicating in a Foreign Language (FL).

This research took place in two State-funded Primary Schools in A Coruña (NW Spain) where all participants are in contact with various languages. Most of them are able to speak Spanish and Galician on a daily basis, as they are co-official languages in this region. They also learn other languages at school as English, German and French. Therefore, this plurilingual context seems to be the appropriate one for the type of research that we are approaching to through this book's pages. The sample involved 288 students from 3rd to 6th Primary School grade and their ages ranged from 8 to 12 years. Their language levels in English ranged from A1 to A2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR, 2001) a guideline used to describe foreign language learners' achievements across Europe.

The research gap that this study tries to solve within this chapter is the increasing need to find solutions to foster and develop the Linguistic Communication Competence in a FL in plurilingual contexts in a much more appealing and motivating way for learners. Therefore, throughout the ECs, young learners may practice their FL oral skills naturally as if they were using their mother tongue, and as if they were playing without noticing that they are learning. In that sense, ECs can be considered an informal method of English learning. Likewise, the importance of this research for the field lays on the fact that the use of the ECs to reinforce the development of oral communication skills fits perfectly for foreign language learners in multicultural contexts. Moreover, most of the studies about the ECs were focused in Chinese settings and specially for adult learners, while this study focuses on young learners in Spain. Nevertheless, this study may be used as an example of good practices to be transferred to any educational context in any country of the world.

Hence, this research aims at answering the following Research Questions (RQ) regarding the use of the ECs for teaching and learning languages purposes in plurilingual contexts:

RQ 1. How do Primary School participants in this research consider the potential of EC to develop their oral comprehension and production English skills?

RQ 2. Does the English Corner environment foster more confidence to speak in a foreign language than the ordinary English Classroom?

To give answer to these RQs and to achieve the objectives planned, some aspects need to be taken into account for example, whether students feel less shy to speak when in a very small group as opposed to in the classroom, or whether they are less worried about making mistakes because it is an informal situation. All impressions, perceptions and observations made by the English Teachers (ETs) and the ELAs, by means of an interview (which is not included in this study because of time and frame constrictions) were considered to triangulate and to give different perspectives to this research. The ELAs and ETs were the same people throughout the whole research period so that homogeneity was guaranteed, and all conditions were kept constant.

A user-friendly questionnaire with a total of seven questions was designed by these authors to get to know and analyse data collected. Questions 1, 2, 3 and 6 were intended to give answer to RQ 1, and questions 4 and 5 of the questionnaire were intended to give answer to RQ 2. Additionally, question number 7 was asked to obtain feedback from participants and to leave room for improvements and future

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