

Investigating teachers' and parents' perceptions on the introduction of English in Greek preschools

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ABSTRACT: The present paper presents some of the initial findings regarding the new educational reform of introducing the English language in preschools in Greece during 2021-2022. The “Introduction of English in Preschools”, known as the EAN Project, aims to develop the appropriate pedagogical and methodological framework for English language teachers and preschool teachers for the introduction of English in Greek preschools. The EAN Project seeks to support EFL and preschool teachers by providing them with a comprehensive training course, indicative educational material, scenarios, and activities specifically designed for preschool children. Another aim is to support and monitor the preschools while contributing also to the formative assessment of this innovative initiative. The data were collected through a questionnaire administered to EFL and preschool teachers and parents. General perceptions, the benefits and the challenges related to the introduction of English in Greek preschools were investigated along with the effect of cooperation between all stakeholders. Analysis revealed that the perceptions are positive from all stakeholders while there are some differences regarding the participants’ views and perceptions, based on their previous experience during the pilot phase, their level of education, their IT skills, and their residency.

Key words: the EAN Project, preschool, early FL learning, views and perceptions, teachers’ cooperation

Una investigación sobre las percepciones de los docentes y los padres sobre la introducción del inglés en las escuelas infantiles griegas

RESUMEN: Este artículo presenta algunos de los resultados iniciales en relación con la nueva reforma educativa de introducción del idioma inglés en los centros preescolares de Grecia durante 2021-2022. La “Introducción del inglés en los centros preescolares”, conocida como el Proyecto EAN, por sus siglas en inglés, tiene como objetivo desarrollar un marco pedagógico y metodológico adecuado para los profesores de inglés y los profesores de preescolar para la introducción del inglés en los centros preescolares griegos. El Proyecto EAN pretende apoyar a los profesores de inglés y de preescolar proporcionándoles un curso de formación completo, material educativo explicativo, y escenarios y actividades diseñadas específicamente para los niños de preescolar. Otro de los objetivos es apoyar y supervisar los centros preescolares, contribuyendo también a la evaluación formativa de esta innovadora

iniciativa. Los datos se recogieron mediante un cuestionario administrado a los profesores de EFL y de preescolar y a los padres. Se investigaron las percepciones generales, los beneficios y los retos relacionados con la introducción del inglés en los centros preescolares griegos, así como el efecto de la cooperación entre todas las partes interesadas. El análisis reveló que las percepciones son positivas por parte de todas las partes interesadas, mientras que existen algunas diferencias en cuanto a las opiniones y percepciones de los participantes, basadas en su experiencia previa durante la fase piloto, su nivel de educación, sus conocimientos de informática y su lugar de residencia.

Palabras clave: Proyecto EAN, preescolar, enseñanza temprana de lengua extranjera, visiones y percepciones, cooperación del profesorado

1. INTRODUCTION

The EAN Project¹ is an educational innovation that concerns the introduction of English as a foreign language in preschool education in Greece, following the reformations taking place in the national educational system. The main aim of the EAN Project has been to provide Greek EFL and preschool teachers with the necessary training programme for the introduction of English in preschools and provide teachers of the two specialties with educational material and developmentally appropriate educational scenarios. According to the Greek context, EFL teachers are responsible for the English time in preschools in the presence of preschool teachers. Through the EAN project, the objective has been to help EFL teachers develop the necessary skills, knowledge and attitudes in order to incorporate the activities in English into the preschool curriculum in the best way possible by cooperating with the preschool teachers.

The ultimate goal of the EAN Project is to produce a high quality and easy to use training scheme along with the appropriate educational material, available on the EAN site (www.ean.auth.gr). This has been achieved after considering all stakeholders' needs, and based on data collected during the implementation of the Project and taking into consideration the evidence from the pilot phase. An additional aim has been the systematic monitoring and supervision of the introduction of English in preschools, while collecting data on the way in which the activities in the English language are incorporated in preschools (Alexiou & Penderi, 2020). In this scope, the investigation of all stakeholders' perceptions, as well as the practices they use in class, is of paramount importance.

2. BENEFITS OF INTRODUCING ENGLISH IN PRESCHOOL

In recent years, the European Commission (2014) as well as other researchers, such as Baidak, Balcon and Motiejunaite (2017), have underlined that introducing English as a foreign language in preschool education is the stepping stone for young children to develop all the

¹ Greek Acronym of the Project which stands for "Introduction of English in preschool education" ("Εισαγωγή της Αγγλικής Γλώσσας στο Νηπιαγωγείο", EAN)

necessary skills needed to cope with the reality of the 21st century. Additionally, communication in other languages, besides a speaker's first language, is also enhanced, following the recent changes in multicultural societies (Baidak, et al., 2017; European Commission, 2014). Afterall, and as UNICEF (2012) has highlighted, such initiatives support future learning, personal growth, and lifelong continuous professional development.

Sobirjonovich (2021) also claims that early exposure to the English language lays the foundations early on, and it is pivotal, as it prepares young children for the upcoming schooling years. In support of that claim, Figel (2015) adds that providing young children with high quality education is advantageous and ensures future academic success, with benefits related not only on a personal, but on a societal level, too. In addition to that, Alexiou (2005, 2009, 2020) comments that introducing preschool children to a foreign language at this very young age is linked with multileveled benefits, and also with multilingualism and intercultural communication.

Furthermore, introducing young children to foreign languages supports the unravelling of children's creativity and enhances their capacities to work on their own as well as in teams, securing the development of a harmonious personality (Sobirjonovich, 2021). Additional benefits reported are memory skills, enhanced imagination, interpersonal communication skills and self-control, too (Sobirjonovich, 2021; Alexiou, 2009). Lefever (2014) also adds that early exposure to a foreign language aids children to broaden their horizons and develop feelings of enthusiasm for languages in general, particularly due to young children's general curiosity.

Positive attitudes towards foreign language learning in the early ages have also been exhibited as beneficial, as older students do not show the same positive attitudes. Moreover, Lucas, Hood and Coyle (2021) have commented on the increased levels of language awareness and therefore intercultural communication, as a result of early foreign language exposure. The researchers also state that learning a foreign language in early childhood is connected with future benefits, particularly in emergent literacy, as children are able to use their memory, phonological skills and visual discrimination to connect what they have heard and learnt to what they are seeing in written form (Lucas, Hood & Coyle, 2021). Other benefits outlined include increasing mental flexibility and improved language literacy skills, similar to natives' (ibid).

Based on the abovementioned claims and research results, this paper will present the views and perceptions of the people who are actively involved in the introduction of a foreign language, English in that case, at the Greek preschool educational level. Indeed, investigating stakeholders' views and perceptions is of paramount importance, particularly because these predict the practices implemented (OECD, 2009). Therefore, the aim is to shed light on the way in which all stakeholders have experienced at the beginning of the first year of the horizontal implementation. This particular research design has been pivotal in monitoring the progress of the EAN Project, contributing to its formative assessment. The results were taken into consideration for the stages that followed within the EAN Project, ensuring that teachers and parents were provided with the necessary support and guidance.

3. CHALLENGES OF INTRODUCING ENGLISH IN PRESCHOOL EDUCATION

Despite the abundance of benefits related to early foreign language learning (see Alexiou, 2020) research exhibits some of the challenges arising in such situations, such as the speaking skills to be taught and the aspect of motivation in these young ages (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014). Moreover, the issue of offering differentiated learning experiences is another aspect that needs to be taken into consideration, along with the number of students in a classroom (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014). The larger the number of children in a preschool classroom, the more difficult it is for teachers to incorporate the foreign language in the curriculum and therefore cater for the educational needs of all students (ibid). In addition to that, Copland, Garton and Burns (2014) stress that EFL teachers' competence, with regard to early childhood education, has been another challenge outlined in some countries and specific educational contexts. Interestingly, Cortina-Pérez and Andúgar (2021) have sought to investigate the teachers' profile, in order to propose the most adequate educators for teaching young learners in the Spanish context. They have focused on providing the teachers' profile based on suitability, qualifications and necessary preparation (Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021). Results suggest that preparation is important, mainly on language enhancement (the language proficiency is indeed vital), early pedagogy and early childhood development (Cortina-Pérez & Andúgar, 2021).

A study in Indonesia, regarding teaching English in early childhood, highlighted that quite a few teachers involved in FL learning at young ages are not as motivated nor as enthusiastic as the particular context demands (Malik, Humaira, Komari, Fathurrochman & Jayanto, 2021). Moreover, the lack of resources and inappropriate material, as well as the large number of students in the classroom only worsen the situation (Malik, Humaira, Komari, Fathurrochman & Jayanto, 2021). In support of that claim, Tefera (2018) concluded that 66.98% of the teachers who took part in the particular study were not adequately qualified to teach in the preschool context. Another study in Indonesia brings to light the issue of limited input in the target language, which prohibits children's performance, along with the lack of facilities and limited teachers' expertise (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020).

The notion that children are like "sponges", and therefore the younger they are exposed to a foreign language, the better their achievements will be, has been widely known (Muñoz, 2014). What is not often taken into consideration is how different children at this young age are, and hence how diverse their characteristics and abilities might be (Savić, 2016). Savić (2016) also discusses the heterogeneity among groups of children, and the importance of respecting it, based on the children's particular needs.

Another challenge, therefore, is to ensure that all children are given equal opportunities to thrive in a FL classroom. One could also add children's small concentration span, discipline, cognitive load and amount of input to the list of challenges (Alexiou, 2021; Alexiou et al, 2019; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020).

These insights were taken into consideration upon decision making for the formative assessment of the EAN Project. Catering for all stakeholders' views and perceptions regarding the challenges they have faced has been critical for the later stages of the Project.

3.1. Teachers' Cooperation

The EAN Project has introduced an innovative teaching model, by bringing teachers of English and preschool teachers together. The close cooperation and planning between the teachers of the two specialties is critical for the successful introduction of English in preschools, as research suggests (Alexiou, 2020; Zamin, Lotfie & Salleh, 2022). In light of that, Lefever (2014) highlights that such a cooperation enhances the sense of continuity within the preschool curriculum, by integrating the EFL teacher in the everyday preschool programme. Most importantly though, such a teaching model provides children with a sense of security and allows teachers to encourage children in participating in the activities, enabling them to pay attention to each child, as the existence of two teachers in a classroom permits that (Lefever, 2014). Moreover, with two teachers being present in the classroom, they are both provided with the opportunity of functioning as role models for the children, by actively participating in the activities, and encouraging children to do so (Lefever, 2014).

3.2. Parental Involvement

The importance of including parents-caregivers of children in the learning process has been highlighted through the years (see also Murphy & Evangelou, 2016). As Cosso, von Suchodoletz and Yoshikawa (2022) underline, involving parents in early foreign language education is an essential factor. Their study has shown that parents' involvement has had a positive effect on their children's performance in the foreign language classroom environment, not only on their "academic" performance, but on their performance in general. Indeed, McDowell, Jack and Compton (2018) state that learning situations which are deprived from parental involvement and support have a negative effect on the students' learning achievements. Their research has also shown that parental involvement also supports parents-caregivers' self-efficacy (McDowell, Jack & Compton, 2018). Still, the way parental involvement is related to student, parent and school outcomes is puzzling due to the multidimensional and multilevel character of the construct.

Penderi et al (2017) delineated parental involvement through four basic dimensions: i. the ecological dimension which refers mainly to the characteristics of the learning environment and its components; ii. the attitudinal dimension, describing parents' beliefs and expectations; iii. the practical dimension that portrays parents' behaviours and practices to promote children's learning and iv. the relational dimension, referring to the emotional climate of parental involvement. With reference to EFL in Greek public schools, Penderi et al., (2017) showed that parents lay emphasis on students' EFL and engage mainly in motivating, encouraging and providing learning opportunities for students to practise their English. The same pattern of engagement was evidenced with regard to preschool children's literacy development (Penderi et al, 2021) highlighting the importance placed by Greek parents in language learning, in general. As early EFL is for the first time introduced in preschools, parents' perceptions and expectations regarding this education is paramount, in order to investigate the basic stakeholders' prospects about early EFL. Supporting the beneficial factor of parental involvement, Zamin, Lotfie and Salleh (2022, p. 58) advise that "...parents and school administrators [should] join forces in improving the quality of education".

The importance of involving parents-guardians of the children has been recognized and taken into consideration by the EAN Project. Therefore, the research design has taken into account their perceptions on the introduction of English at preschool level.

4. METHODOLOGY

In this section, the methodology of the present research study is presented regarding the participants and the research tool employed. Additionally, the data collection process is described to answer the research questions described below that guided methodological choices:

More specifically, this study investigates four main parameters: a. general perceptions about the introduction of English in the preschool, b. benefits and challenges of the introduction of the English language at preschool level; c. relationship and cooperation between teachers of the two specialties, and d. relationship and cooperation with parents. In relation to those parameters, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level and orientation of all participants' perceptions?
2. How do English teachers perceive the introduction of English in preschools?
3. How do preschool teachers perceive the introduction of English in the preschool?
4. How do parents perceive the introduction of English in preschool?

4.1. Participants Profile

The participants (see Table 1) were 10.719 in total, with the majority being women (93%). More specifically, the questionnaire was administered to 6.156 preschool teachers and 1.157 EFL teachers. The number of preschool teachers participating is naturally much higher as one EFL teacher is usually the same for 2 or 3 preschools while in each preschool there are 2 or 3 preschool teachers. As for parents, 3.406 parents completed the questionnaire.

All the participants came from different parts of Greece, and more specifically 12% of them from agricultural areas, 35% of them from semi-urban areas, 26% of them from urban areas and 28% of them from Athens or Thessaloniki, big urban centres in Greece.

With reference to educational qualifications, more than half of the participants (54%) are University graduates, while 30% of them hold MA or PhD titles as well. The vast majority of the participants (94%) speak only Greek at home, while 73% know an additional foreign language apart from Greek, with 52% being at the B1-B2 CEFR level. Moreover, almost all participants (98%) have IT knowledge and skills.

Regarding the EFL teachers who participated in the study, the majority of them also hold a permanent position at schools (96%), with 82% of them having experience in primary education. Moreover, 5% of the EFL teachers took part in the pilot phase of the introduction of English in preschools during the last academic year. As for the preschool teachers who participated in the study, 35% of them hold an administrative position at preschools. Moreover, most of them are permanent teachers (96%). Additionally, 4% of them took part in the pilot phase of the introduction of English in preschools during the last academic year.

Finally, with regard to the children's parents, half of them are parents of a female child. Furthermore, 60% of them have their first child in preschool.

Table 1. *Frequency percentages for demographic variables for all participants (N=10.719)*

QUESTION	RESPONSE	PERCENTAGE %
Role	Parent/Guardian of the child	31,70
	EFL Teacher	10,77
	Preschool Teacher	57,29
Educational level	Obligatory Education (up to 12th Senior Grade)	5,94
	Vocational Training Schools (IEK)	6,95
	University level	54,37
	Master's level	28,07
	PhD level	1,46
	Other	3,21
Additional languages	B1- B2 CEFR level	52,13
	C1 - C2 CEFR level	47,87
IT skills/knowledge	Low level	2,96
	Medium level	37,90
	High level	47,64
	Exceptionally high level	11,49

4.2. Research Instruments

In order to investigate all stakeholders' (teachers and parents) perceptions, a questionnaire was developed which comprises two parts. The first part includes some questions regarding the demographic information of the participants. The second part of the questionnaire consists of 22 questions which address the four axes of the stakeholders' perceptions. The corresponding subscales regarded: (a) General perceptions regarding the introduction of English in preschools, (5 questions) e.g., "The introduction of English at preschool level is in line with the preschool philosophy and the preschool curriculum", (b) Benefits and challenges of the introduction of the English language in preschool, (5 questions) e.g., "The introduction of English in preschools may enhance the cognitive development of preschool children", (c) Relationship and cooperation between teachers of the two specialties, (6 questions) e.g., "A good relationship and cooperation between the EFL and the preschool teacher may help children to participate more in the English activities at preschool level", and (d) Relationship and cooperation with parents, (6 questions) e.g., "It is important that parents and teachers cooperate in order to form common and realistic expectations regarding English in preschools".

This questionnaire, for teachers and parents, was on a Likert scale, from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree).

4.3. Data collection and analysis

The particular questionnaire was piloted prior to the final administration and Cronbach's alpha was calculated so as to ensure validity and reliability. The questionnaire was administered in an electronic form, via the limesurvey platform. It was designed by the multidisciplinary EAN team, of Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. Data were collected during October and November 2021, during the initial stages of teacher training, at the beginning of the horizontal introduction of English in Greek state preschools. The participants were informed on the study via the training platform as well as via the EAN site (www.ean.auth.gr) and through a detailed letter on the procedure and the ethics of the study, approved by the relevant Ethics Committee. The participants completed the questionnaire after giving consent.

The data collected were coded statistically analysed to answer the research questions. More specifically, regarding the descriptive statistics, the mean (M) and the standard deviation (SD) were calculated for the four subscales, having previously conducted the appropriate internal consistency tests for all subscales using the Cronbach's alpha, almost always at 0.90 for all four scales. In order to investigate how the different roles of the stakeholders (teachers of the two specialties and parents) may affect the distributions of scores, non-parametric statistical analyses were used, as the distribution was not normal. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney (two samples) analysis and Kruskal-Wallis (more than two samples) were performed. Moreover, post-hoc analyses were performed in order to investigate the case where a scale statistically significantly affected any variable, using Dunn and Benjamini-Hochberg. In all analyses, the cut-off point for the approval/rejection of the null hypotheses was $p=0.05$, and two-sided tests were performed. The statistical analysis performed was carried out using the open code R language of statistical programming.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Participants' perceptions

The first research question examines the level and orientation of all participants' perceptions regarding: a. general perceptions about the introduction of English in the preschool level, b. benefits and challenges of the introduction of the English language in preschools, c. relationship and cooperation between teachers of the two specialties and d. relationship and cooperation with parents. Concerning the first subscale, regarding the general perceptions of the participants on the introduction of English in preschools, the results reveal that the majority of the EFL and preschool teachers, as well parents hold positive views about the implementation of English in the particular level of education. Additionally, with regard to the second subscale related to the benefits and challenges of introducing English in preschools, results suggest that 70% of the participants believe that there are more benefits rather than challenges accompanying exposure to English at these young ages. It seems, therefore, that

the benefits of early EFL outscore the challenges that may arise. Lack of motivation or the large number of children at class mentioned by Copland, Garton and Burns (2014) are not reported in this study. Nor do the participants share the belief that there is lack of enthusiasm or inadequate teaching material, as Malik, Humaira, Komari, Fathurrochman and Jayanto (2021) have stated. On the contrary, the findings of the study exhibit positive perceptions by all the participants.

Moreover, with respect to the third subscale, investigating the relationship and cooperation between teachers of the two specialties, 85% of both the EFL and preschool teachers understand that a good relationship, and therefore good cooperation, between teachers of the two specialties is of paramount importance. These results are in line with Zamin, Lotfie and Salleh's (2022), who place emphasis on the critical role of good, honest, and everlasting cooperation between teachers.

Finally, regarding the fourth subscale, which examines the relationship and cooperation with parents, 81% of the participants have positive views and perceptions. These findings support the positive stance of parents regarding EFL even from an early age, as evidenced in Penderi et al., (2017) at a higher educational level.

The mean scores and the standard deviations on each of the four subscales of the questionnaire are shown in table 2. In the same table, the reliability of each scale, using the Cronbach alpha measurement for internal consistency, with high values, is also provided, having taken into consideration all testing items comprising each scale, based on the sum of responses received by all stakeholders.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics and measure of internal consistency for each scale of the questionnaire (N=10719)*

SCALES	M	SD	CRONBACH'S ALPHA
General perceptions regarding the introduction of English in preschools	3,91	0,70	0,896
Benefits and challenges of the introduction of the English language in preschools	3,80	0,78	0,926
Relationship and cooperation between teachers	4,16	0,63	0,925
Relationship and cooperation with parents	3,04	0,61	0,913

Exploratory analyses were carried out to investigate possible variations in the scores of the four subscales and the demographic information of the participants who completed the questionnaire. The results reveal that there are indeed some variations in these variables (demographic information). More specifically, the participants who speak another language at an intermediate level (B1-B2) score lower in all scales ["General perceptions" (W(1)=7073886, $p<0.001$), "Benefits and challenges" (W(1)=6858086.5, $p<0.001$), "Relationship and cooperation between teachers" (W(1)=6973755, $p<0.001$) and "Relationship and communication with parents" (W(1)=7180656.5, $p<0.001$), compared to the participants who speak another language at C1-C2 level at home. Therefore, the better the language proficiency (apart

from L1) the participants have, the more positive their views and perceptions regarding the introduction of English at preschool age.

Additionally, statistically significant results emerged on the demographic variable “IT skills/knowledge” and the scores in all four subscales [“General perceptions” ($\chi^2(3)=102.231$, $p<0.001$), “Benefits and challenges” ($\chi^2(3)=113.991$, $p<0.001$), “Relationship and cooperation between teachers” ($\chi^2(3)=112.051$, $p<0.001$), and “Relationship and communication with parents” ($\chi^2(3)=150.722$, $p<0.001$)]. The post-hoc analysis, exemplified that the higher the digital literacy of the participants, the more positive their perceptions. This finding supports the idea that digital literacy promotes a way of thinking and doing and involves social practices that provide better tools to analyse and make meaning of situations (Jones, & Hafner, 2012; Knobel, & Lankshear, 2007).

Furthermore, it was found that the variable of “Residency” also had an effect on the scores of three of the subscales [“General perceptions” ($\chi^2(3)=9.039$, $p=0.029$), “Benefits and challenges” ($\chi^2(3)=9.254$, $p=0.026$), and “Relationship and communication with parents” ($\chi^2(3)=9.401$, $p=0.024$)]. The Kruskal-Wallis analysis performed, revealed that participants who live in an agricultural area have more positive perceptions with regard to the introduction of English at preschool level, compared to the participants who live in big urban centres, such as Athens or Thessaloniki. These results could indeed be explained by the fact that in metropolitan areas, English has been part of preschool education in the private sector for many years now. It may also be that participants of the study who are residents of more touristic/ seaside areas are more exposed to English in their everyday experience and understand the need for early EFL.

5.2. EFL perceptions and ecological variables

The second research question examined how English teachers perceive the introduction of English at preschool level, the benefits and challenges of the introduction of the English language in preschools, the relationship and cooperation between teachers of the two specialties and the relationship and cooperation with parents with regard to the EFL teachers who took part in the study, some interesting results emerge. More specifically, the EFL teachers who have had experience from the pilot phase of the introduction of English at preschool level during the academic year 2020-2021, exhibit more positive views regarding their relationship with the preschool teacher ($W(1)=36504.5$, $p=0.005$), and their relationship with parents ($W(1)=35682$, $p=0.018$), compared to the EFL teachers who were not involved in the pilot phase of the introduction of the English language in Greek preschools. It is evident, therefore, that the experience gained from the pilot phase positively affected and inspired EFL teachers in realizing several benefits regarding this educational reform. As the EAN philosophy and methodology was based on this pilot phase (Alexiou, Penderi & Serafeim, 2021), this is an important finding suggesting that the EAN pedagogical framework for early EFL has beneficial results for the establishment of collaboration and positive relationships in the preschool community as cultivating ‘a cooperation culture’ was highlighted as a success factor by Alexiou (2020, p.20). This is also an important principle and goal in the new Curriculum for Preschool Education (Alexiou et al, 2022).

The statistical analyses also reveal that the EFL teachers’ level of education impacts on their relationship with the preschool teacher ($\chi^2(5)=12.640$, $p=0.027$), as well as the coopera-

tion between them ($\chi^2(5)=11.501$, $p=0.042$), and their cooperation with parents ($\chi^2(5)=11.828$, $p=0.037$). More specifically, the higher the level of education of EFL teachers, the more they value a good relationship and cooperation with the teacher of the other specialty and parents, too. This finding is in line with other studies concerning teachers' views regarding the importance of parental involvement, showing that the higher the educational qualifications the more emphasis is placed on the value of parents' engagement in students' learning and education (Abdullah et al., 2011).

Moreover, it was found that the EFL teachers' "Residency" had an effect on their reports related to their relationship with the preschool teacher ($\chi^2(3)=9.170$, $p=0.027$) and their cooperation with parents ($\chi^2(3)=14.013$, $p=0.013$). In both cases, it appears that the EFL teachers who live in urban and metropolitan areas appear to have a better relationship with the preschool teacher and cooperate better with parents, compared to the EFL teachers who live in agricultural areas. This finding may relate to the previous one, as in urban and metropolitan areas teachers may have more opportunities or access to professional development and continuous training which in turn can affect their perceptions regarding the importance of relationship and cooperation in the educational setting.

5.3. Preschool teachers' perceptions and ecological variables

The third research question examines how preschool teachers perceive the introduction of English at preschool level, the benefits and challenges of this initiative, the relationship and cooperation between teachers of the two specialties and the relationship and cooperation with parents. Examining the results yielded by the preschool teachers participating in the study, some interesting findings are worth mentioning. The preschool teachers who were involved in the pilot phase of the introduction of English in preschools prior to the horizontal implementation, exhibit more positive views regarding their relationship with the EFL teacher ($W(1)=819452$, $p=0.019$), their cooperation with the EFL teacher ($W(1)=874705.5$, $p<0.001$), and their cooperation with parents ($W(1)=842086$, $p=0.002$), compared to the preschool teachers who did not have experience from the pilot phase. It seems then, that the pilot phase has had a positive effect on the preschool teachers, too, who realised the importance of communicating and cooperating well with all stakeholders for the successful introduction of English at this early age. The fact that both the pilot training and the EAN project training program involved teachers of both specialties in the same training sessions, may have boosted these positive results. This fact certainly 'infused' them with a sense of belonging to the same 'group' or working for the same cause and in any case encouraged and nurtured the cooperation between them.

Similar to the EFL teachers, the preschool teachers' level of education (demographic variable) also had an effect on their relationship with the EFL teacher ($\chi^2(5)=43.225$, $p<0.001$), as well as their cooperation ($\chi^2(5)=31.177$, $p<0.001$), their relationship with parents ($\chi^2(5)=61.758$, $p<0.001$), and their cooperation with parents ($\chi^2(5)=15.654$, $p=0.008$). In fact, the higher the level of education of preschool teachers, the more they understand how important it is to have a good relationship and cooperation with the EFL teacher and parents, as well.

However, it was found that the preschool teachers who know an additional foreign language at a B1-B2 level, have higher scores regarding their relationship with the EFL

teacher ($W(1)=2508028.5$, $p<0.001$), the cooperation with the EFL teacher ($W(1)=2479236.5$, $p=0.015$), and their cooperation with parents ($W(1)=2507589.0$, $p<0.001$), compared to those preschool teachers who know an additional foreign language at a C1-C2 level. One way to explain this result might be that the lower their level of proficiency in a foreign language, the more the preschool teachers understood the need to form good relationships and thus benefit from the expertise of the teacher of the other specialty.

Furthermore, the variable “IT knowledge/skills” was found to have a statistically significant effect on preschool teachers’ perceptions. Firstly, a statistically significant effect emerged on the preschool teachers’ cooperation with the EFL teacher ($\chi^2(3)=15.092$, $p=0.002$). Moreover, “IT knowledge/skills” statistically significantly impacts on preschool teachers’ perceptions regarding relationship with parents ($\chi^2(3)=24.015$, $p<0.001$), as well as their cooperation with parents ($\chi^2(3)=72.128$, $p<0.001$). It appears that the better knowledge the preschool teachers have on IT, the more they value the relationship and cooperation with the other stakeholders.

Finally, with regard to the preschool teachers, it was found that their “Residency” affects their reports on their relationship with the EFL teacher ($\chi^2(3)=18.156$, $p=0.002$) as well as their cooperation with the EFL teacher ($\chi^2(3)=31.665$, $p<0.001$) and their cooperation with parents ($\chi^2(3)=19.515$, $p<0.001$). It seems therefore that the preschool teachers who live in agricultural areas attribute lower value to relationships and cooperation, compared to the preschool teachers living in urban and metropolitan areas.

5.4. Parents’ perceptions and ecological variables

The fourth research question examined how parents perceive the introduction of English at preschool level, the benefits and challenges of the introduction of the English language in preschools, the relationship and cooperation between teachers of the two specialties and the relationship and cooperation with parents and how ecological variables such as level of education, knowledge of a foreign language, and residency. Regarding the parents who participated in the study, some notable findings are also presented. It appears that parents’ level of education (demographic variable) influenced their relationship with the EFL teacher ($\chi^2(5)=75.932$, $p<0.001$), as well as their cooperation ($\chi^2(5)=64.946$, $p<0.001$). Interestingly, the higher the level of education of parents-guardians, the more they understood that having a good relationship and cooperating effectively with the EFL teacher is of paramount importance for the successful introduction of English at preschool level.

In addition to that, it was found that the parents-guardians who know a foreign language at a B1-B2 level have lower scores regarding their relationship with the preschool teacher ($W(1)=788171.0$, $p=0.031$) and their cooperation with the preschool in general ($W(1)=805146.5$, $p=0.001$), compared to parents-guardians who know a foreign language at a C1-C2 level. Apparently, the higher the parents’ foreign language proficiency, the more they value their relationship and cooperation with the preschool.

Further on, it seems that the demographic variable “IT knowledge/skills” also has an effect on the parents-guardians cooperation with the preschool ($\chi^2(3)=10.453$, $p=0.015$). The more knowledgeable the parents are digitally, the more they value a good cooperation with the preschool their child is attending.

Finally, it was found that parents' "Residency" (demographic variable) affected the scores on their relationship with the EFL teacher ($\chi^2(3)=54.897$, $p<0.001$), as well as their cooperation with the EFL teacher ($\chi^2(3)=36.322$, $p<0.001$), their cooperation with the preschool teacher ($\chi^2(3)=11.123$, $p<0.001$) and the preschool in general ($\chi^2(3)=22.094$, $p<0.001$). In other words, parents-guardians living in agricultural and semi-urban areas exhibited a better relationship and cooperation with the teachers of the two specialties and the preschool in general, compared to parents-guardians living in urban centres. This is probably due to the fact that in smaller places it is easier to create personal relationships and to maintain them. Distance and other practical factors may obstruct or make ties difficult in urban centers.

These results are of utmost importance, since, as previous researchers (Penderi et al., 2017; Murphy and Evangelou, 2016) underline, parents lay emphasis on students' EFL and engage mainly in motivating, encouraging and providing learning opportunities for students to practice their English. Thus, "...parents and school administrators [should] join forces in improving the quality of education" (Zamin, Lotfie & Salleh (2022, p. 58).

6. CONCLUSION

The horizontal implementation of English in preschools was fully supported by the EAN Project. Among the main aims of the Project has been the systematic monitoring and supervision of all stakeholders, taking into consideration their views and suggestions. The present paper focused on providing the basic stakeholders' (teachers of the two specialization and parents) perceptions during the initial stage of the horizontal implementation. Their responses have been crucial in ensuring the quality of the Project while assisting the process of formative assessment.

In order to investigate the stakeholders' perceptions, a questionnaire was administered. The questionnaire employed comprised four subscales: a) general perceptions regarding the introduction of English at preschool level, (b) benefits and challenges of the introduction of the English language at preschool level, (c) relationship and cooperation between teachers and (d) relationship and cooperation with parents. The sample is very large (10.719), which validates the responses and makes findings reliable.

Overall and unlike other cases, where the introduction of English at preschool age was challenging (Copland, Garton & Burns, 2014; Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020), the results of this study have shown that all participants hold positive perceptions, and they focus on the benefits rather than the challenges of introducing English in preschools.

Statistically significant differences are found on the participants' perceptions based on their level of education, the level of foreign language proficiency and the level of their IT skills and digital literacy knowledge. More specifically, the higher the level of education, and the higher the level of proficiency in a foreign language, the more important the stakeholders feel that the benefits are, regarding the introduction of English at preschool level and the more they valued the cooperation and good relationship between them. Both the EFL and the preschool teachers place emphasis on the importance of cooperation not only between them but also with the parents. In particular, teachers who took part in the pilot phase of

the introduction of English appear to be more convinced and exhibited even more positive views on the benefits regarding this innovative educational reform.

These findings highlight the importance of introducing English in preschools, and the benefits interwoven, highlighting the positive findings the pilot phase has already shed light on (Alexiou et al, 2021). The particular findings are also in line with European trends in education (Alexiou, 2020), as the EAN project paid particular attention to cater for, taking into consideration not only teachers but the children's holistic development at preschool as well as their families (Alexiou, 2020, Penderi et al., 2017). Moreover, the introduction of English in the framework of the socio-pedagogical role of preschool is emphasised along with the development and enhancement of the identity of global citizens, as the reality of 21st century skills demand (Penderi, 2022).

Special emphasis should be placed on the characteristics that shape the profile of those who have the most important role in children's lives, such as their teachers and their parents, in relation to their perceptions that affect many aspects of education. The existence of good cooperation and the importance of it between teachers has also been an encouraging finding, as literature and research highlights (Zamin, Lotfie & Salleh, 2022; Lefever, 2014). Most importantly, when it comes to the English language at preschool level, these perceptions are of paramount importance, as they demonstrate the need for systematic and methodologically appropriate teacher training programmes, that would ensure a successful and cooperative model of implementation (Alexiou, 2020). Afterall, it is the views and perceptions of individuals that affect their behaviour and classroom practices.

7. REFERENCES

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