

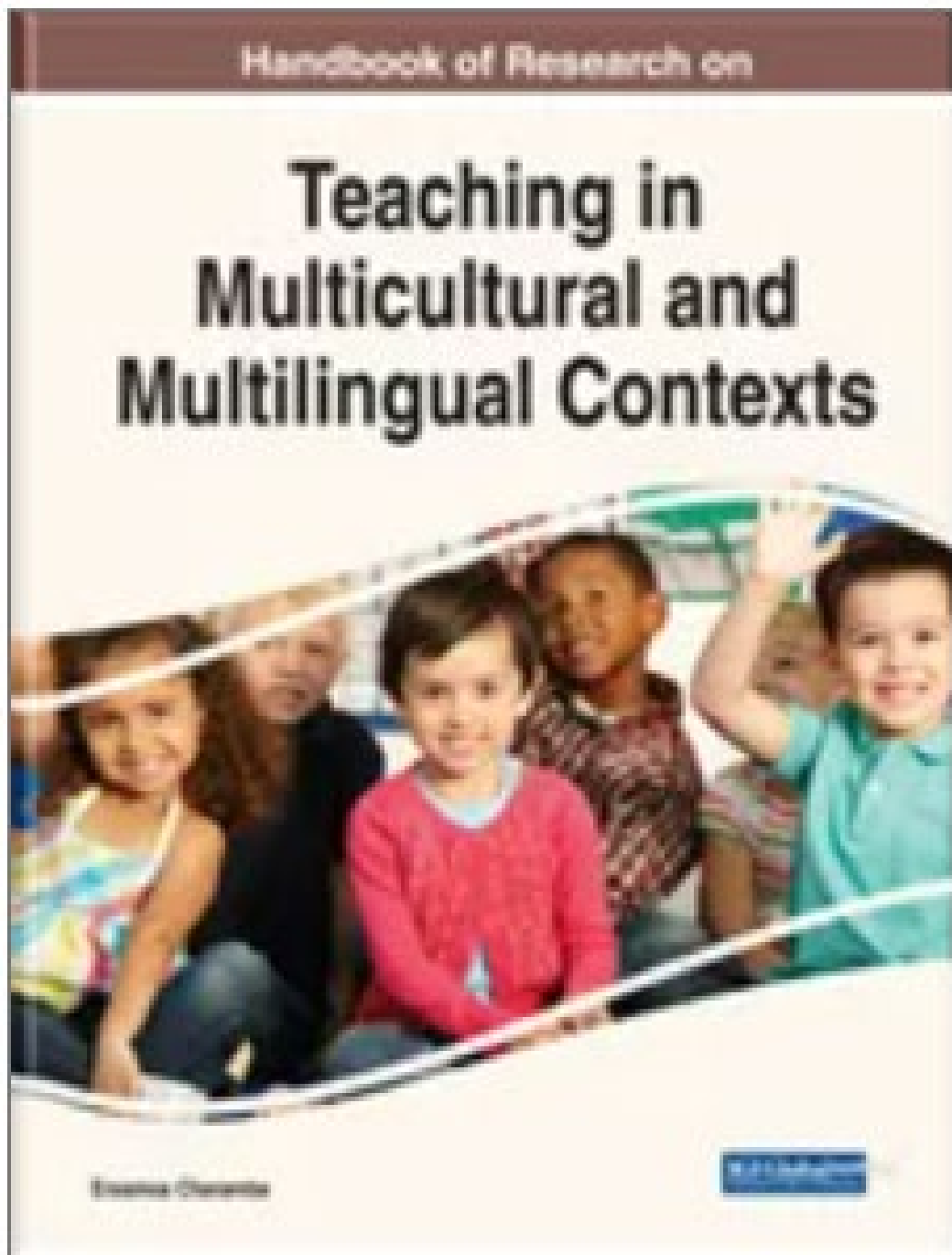
Handbook of Research on Teaching in Multicultural and Multilingual Contexts

Erasmus Charamba (University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa)

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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

arrangements, as it could be seen in the final section of this chapter. The variables of “sex” and “grade” were also considered in order to better analyse data and obtain contrasted results.

This chapter is divided into six main sections for a better comprehension: 1) a brief introduction in which the research problem, its importance for the field, the research gap found and the aims are presented, 2) a theoretical framework in which the origin, use and other researcher’s references about the EC are explained, 3) the method used during fieldwork at the two Primary Schools for data collection, 4) the analysis of the results, 5) some solutions and recommendations for stakeholders, instructors, teachers and policy makers, and 6) the final conclusion including future research directions and limitations of the study. To fully complete this chapter an acknowledgment, references, key terms and definitions, and an appendix with the questionnaire are also included at the end of this study.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Formal and Informal Settings for Learning

Before exploring the origins of the English Corner (EC) as an informal setting for teaching and learning languages purposes, it is necessary to shed some light about the meaning of “formal” and “informal” educational settings. When it comes to talk about “Formal educational settings” as school, high school or college, there is no need of further explanation as everyone may guess. By contrast, in conceptualizing informal settings, we follow Feuer (2009) who based his research on analysing informal settings of education during Summer Camps for Primary School participants in the USA. His definition for informal settings helps to clarify this term: “informal places of learning are settings outside the formal classroom where learning takes place experientially and often through social interaction” (Feuer, 2009, p. 652). The atmosphere of these settings is usually fun, activities are completed in groups, language assistants do not behave like formal teachers, and there is no formal curriculum, nor grading or assessment. However, the boundaries between formal and informal educational settings are not clear enough because many of the same learning activities held in formal classrooms also occur in informal programs, and informal programs may include episodes of formal lessons.

Origins of the English Corners¹

The roots of the ECs are not very well known and have not been studied in depth so far. According to the literary review, it seems that China is the geographical place where the ECs first started. Following Kellaway (2013) and his previous studies it looks like two hundred years ago Christian missionaries moved to China with the need to develop the linguistic skills and cultural awareness of their congregations and future local church leaders. This religious influence was also present in Chinese universities, as these teachers/missionaries accepted to teach within faculties up to five years courses, and to run English Corners open to students on weekday evenings. Taking this religious background into account, it seems quite obvious that the first discussions in the ECs were presumably centred around religious themes.

The implementation of the ECs has developed to our days, and topics for discussion are very diverse not being centred in religious matters anymore. However, as a consequence of these origins, most of the studies about the ECs are focused in Chinese settings and specially for adult learners. Researchers as Xuesong (2009) analysed the comments of a group of learners participating in an EC in a Chinese context.

Apart from the benefits achieved by participants regarding supportive peers, self-assertion opportunities and autonomous learning, they concluded that thanks to participating in the ECs some changes in their self-identities also occurred. Similarly, and according to this author, this study invited language teachers to consider how such extracurricular or informal learning activities could be integrated into formal teaching and learning practices too.

As previously stated, these informal settings for learning foreign languages were firstly devoted to foster oral skills. The most interesting definition of a College English Corner was offered by Huang in 1998 as follows:

A college English corner is any “corner” (appropriate place) on a university campus for students to practice their oral English in their spare time. English corners began to be popular in the early 1980s in China because they provided an English-speaking environment to reinforce the oral skills learned in class. Today, English corners exist in all universities in China, but with its function limited to only oral practice (Huang, 1998).

Nevertheless, and according to the same author College ECs could be used not only to nurture the development of oral skills, but also for written skills. His research was based on using the EC activities to help students to promote written production skills successfully when learning English as a Foreign Language. But, as it can be appreciated by the eager reader, the exploration to foster written skills in the ECs could perfectly conform the basis for another type of research different than the present one.

English Corners in the Context of this Research

In 2018, a preliminary study based on describing the experience of promoting oral skills using the English Corner as an informal setting took place in Spain (Couto-Cantero & Sanderson, 2018). As a consequence of that, and after two years of world pandemic conditions, these authors decided to give continuity to this research as they consider it still deserves full attention more than ever. The implementation of an informal setting as the EC in Primary School level, and not in the Higher Education level, has not been explored yet and this is why, as promised in that previous preliminary research, intervening variables such as “sex” and “grade” have been contrasted and analyzed in this study to deepen into the findings of such a large sample collected.

From a sociocultural perspective, parallel discourses need to arise in the classroom to make communication more real and participants speak more naturally. On a daily basis the main speech is usually played by the teacher. The teacher usually controls the Teaching Talking Time (TTT) and the shifts in the classroom (Dalton-Puffer, 2006) and students are not active agents in the learning process at all. The need for a real communication within formal or non-formal educational environments is a must which cannot be denied. There is also a requirement for interaction and meaningful learning to happen in these settings. Foreign language teachers need to be in touch with new methodologies in order to increase the participation and interaction within their students (de Artiñano, 2016). Moreover, parallel discourses and not a one-way direction discourse on the part of the teacher should be promoted making learners active and real agents in the teaching and learning process.

Following the Council of Europe recommendations about language policies, the Spanish brand Fomento de Centros de Enseñanza Schools (FCE) encourages the development of plurilingual competences through their offer of different Foreign Languages. In this context, the English Corner was first applied

by a Bilingual School belonging to FCE in the Autonomous Community of Madrid in Spain. The EC project was piloted in 2009, and finally was implemented in 2010. Since then, the EC project has been extended to all Fomento de Centros de Enseñanza around Spain. As an example, the English Project of the two schools included in this research offers a First Foreign Language, which is English, as well as a Second Foreign Language, which can be German or French.

The language immersion starts from the very young ages, at Pre-primary level with the innovative projects: *Let's Talk*, *Magic Dragon*, *Magic Drama*, and the ECs. Later, in Primary and Secondary school levels, ECs continue and some subjects are taught using the Content and Language Integrated Learning approach (CLIL). By means of this approach 1/3rd of subjects are taught through English. Another important component of these schools is that students regularly take external Cambridge exams which certificate and allow them to identify their level of English. These tests are taken annually to maintain quality standards in the Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages in bilingual/plurilingual Schools. In addition, the final objective of these schools is that learners are able to reach the Cambridge Advanced Certificate or C1 level of the CEFR upon completing their Baccalaureate. FCE schools also offers their students the possibility to spend one term or a whole academic year in Ireland, UK, the USA or Canada for a total language immersion. ECs were initially conceived to reinforce and develop the oral skills needed to be assessed in the aforementioned external examinations, but nowadays the main target of the ECs in these schools is clearly devoted to promote and develop communicative skills.

METHOD

Context, Design and Procedure

The context for this study took place in two primary schools belonging to FCE, located in the province of A Coruña (North-Western Spain). All participants lived in a region in which two official languages coexist (Spanish and Galician) and many of them were able to speak both languages interchangeably. Therefore, in this particular geographical context, four languages are studied by young learners, the two official ones, English as the first Foreign Language (FL1), and French or German as the second Foreign Language option (FL2). This study contains a mixed methodology research designed to obtain both, quantitative and qualitative information out of the data collection tool elaborated by these authors.

The research was divided into three main phases lasting from January to March 2019. First phase, theoretical backdrop and elaboration of the questionnaires for the students. Second phase, fieldwork at the Primary Schools when the questionnaires were elaborated, then given to the ELAs and completed by the participants. The third and final phase, includes the data analysis and elaboration of the chapter including conclusion, limitations, recommendations and further research.

Participants and Test Administration

The participants involved in this study were 288 students (151 female and 137 male) from two state-funded schools. A slightly high percentage of females can be observed (52.4%) as compared to males (47.5%). They were all Primary School learners from 3rd to 6th Grade living in a plurilingual context, as Galicia is a bilingual community in which both Galician and Spanish languages coexist as mother

tongues. Their ages ranged from 8 to 12 years and their language levels in English fluctuated from A1 to A2 according to the CEFR (2001).

Regarding the test administration and completion of the questionnaire, which constitutes the second phase of this research, those questionnaires were collected in both School Centres just before the Covid lockdown. It should be noted that these authors asked the participants' English teachers to disseminate, explain and assist with the completion of the instrument in the ordinary English class, rather than in the EC as this avoided unnecessary repetition of the instructions. Therefore, the English Teacher was available to help students complete their questionnaires, as were the ELAs. A consent form was not needed for this specific research as both Heads of School Centres affirmed that parents and tutors signed a confirmation form at the beginning of the academic year and all questionnaires were anonymous. Nevertheless, all the elements included in the Ethical Code of Research approved by the Ethical Research Committee at University of A Coruña (27/02/2019) were considered at any time of this research.

Data Collection Tools

The instrument elaborated for this research is an accessible questionnaire completed by Primary School students (3rd to 6th Grades) during the second term of the academic year 2018-19. When it comes to deal with data collection tools, questionnaires were chosen as the best option as they offer the most reliable means of learning what a group of people think about a specific matter (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Moreover, they are also very useful to discover associations among variables and to analyse data.

It is worth mentioning that as far as the format of the tool is concerned, the authors decided to use a tangible hand-made questionnaire (a piece of sheet) instead of an online form, due to the age of the participants. The main reasons for that were: to make it easy to handle, to make it easy to answer, and to make it attractive and appealing for them, so they wanted to participate in this research. Consequently, format and design of the questionnaire was also pondered by researchers to make it eye-catching for learners, especially 3rd and 4th graders. Therefore, a user-friendly questionnaire was designed according to the participant's ages to gather data for this research as it can be seen at the end of this chapter in Appendix I.

Regarding the elaboration of the contents of the instrument, a number of different questions were considered by these authors. An interview² for the ELAs and ETs was also designed as they were fully involved in this research. Questionnaires were anonymous so no names were required, and the instrument only asked for students' sex and grade as two possible variables to be analysed. A total of seven questions questionnaire was prepared, the first five closed questions were designed to gather quantitative data. The last two short open questions helped these authors to explore and analyse qualitative data in order to find out students' perceived strengths and weaknesses of the EC, allowing space for future improvements as it will be appreciated later on in the corresponding section.

Initial drafts were examined by three external experts for a proper questionnaire validation. Level of difficulty, length of the questionnaire, comprehension and other items were also considered to critically assess and validate those instruments before fieldwork. The final version of the questionnaire was agreed with the experts' suggestions and was satisfactory to the researchers and the ELAs. It must be said that the external experts were three proficient specialists in the Teaching and Learning of Foreign Languages field at three different Universities in the Spanish national panoramas (University of Córdoba, Andalucía; University of Oviedo, Asturias; and University of Las Palmas de Gran Canarias, Islas Canarias) so their expertise and feedback turned out to be paramount in this research. Therefore, it can be ascertained that

this is a participatory approach in which the ETs, the ELAs, the external experts and these researchers were all members of the same study and helped to select the most suitable items for analysis. Henceforth, internal validity and reliability of the instruments designed can be proved.

Data Analysis

The treatment of the quantitative data for items 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 was carried out through Microsoft Excel analysing the statistical data, specifically, the absolute frequency (n_i) and the relative frequency (f_i) in percentage. Regarding the qualitative answer to question 1: Why? and to question 6: What do you like best about the EC? the data treatment was carried out through discourse analysis. That is to say, a content analysis based on inductive logic in which the text is classified into essential units to, subsequently, codify that data according to a system of categories. In this case, the responses were redrafted based on essential units in order to categorize them. This form of data treatment is inspired by the Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and it is also called the Constant Comparative Method. Moreover, this study is constructed on a dialogic and sociolinguistic perspective because it has been designed to develop the understanding of informal learning through conversation and interpersonal experiences (Johnson, 2004). Lastly, question number 7 of the questionnaire was elaborated on purpose to collect answers from participants about improvements for the future. The answers to this question were also analysed and detailed in the corresponding section of this chapter.

FINDINGS

As far as results is concerned and for a better comprehension of the data analysis, two sections have been included as follows.

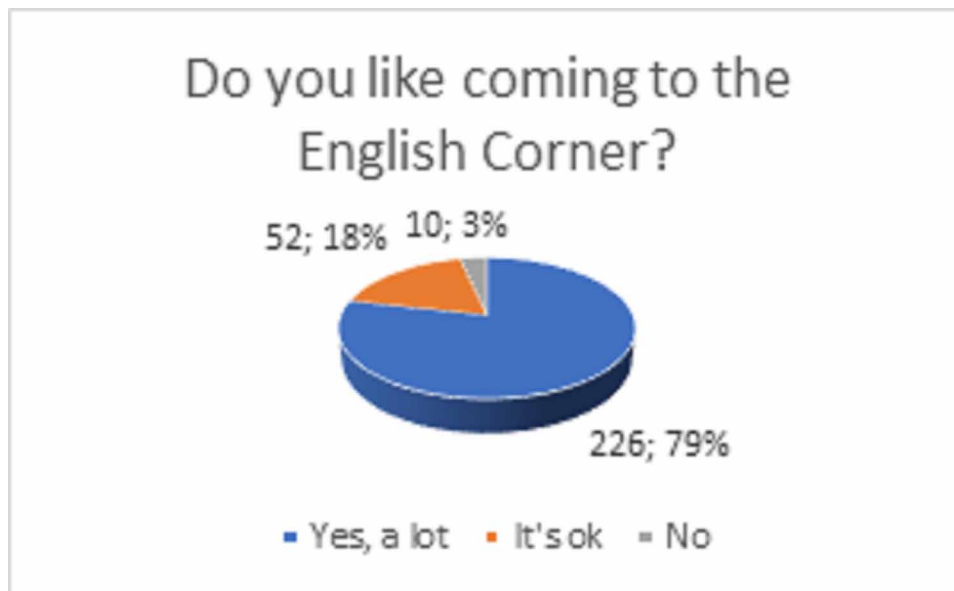
Results Based on RQ1

Questions 1, 2, 3 and 6 of the questionnaire were aimed at answering RQ1: whether Primary School students (3rd to 6th Grade) considered the potential of EC to develop their oral comprehension and production English skills. Regarding quantitative data for question 1: “Do you like coming to the English Corner?” most of the participants 78.49% (N=226) answered: “yes a lot”, some of them 18.06% (N=52) answered: “It’s ok”, and just a few 18.06% (N=52) said: “no”. As it can be seen in Figure 1, most of the participants liked to go to the EC.

Question 1 was also analysed according to the variables: “sex” and “grade”. In this sense, as it can be observed in Figure 2, the value: “yes, a lot” decreased progressively from 3rd grade (91%) to 6th grade (77%) in both male and female respondents. On the other hand, the value: “it’s ok” increased again from 3rd grade (9%) to 6th grade (23%) in both female and male respondents. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that at any time the difference between both variables was always significant in favour of the answer: “yes, a lot”.

The following questions 2 and 3 of the questionnaire were analysed from a comparative perspective. Therefore, comparing question 2: “How much do you speak English in class?” with question 3: “How much do you speak English in the English Corner?” results categorically concluded that there are significant differences in favour of the EC. Thus, 80.90% (N=233) of the participants answered they speak

Figure 1. Results based on question 1



“a lot” in the EC, opposite to the 66.32% (N=191) who answered this for the English Classroom. This can be seen in Table 1 below.

It is worth mentioning that analysing again the variables: “sex” and “grade” for question number 3, findings reveal that in 6th grade most of the boys (95%) answered they speak “a lot” in the English Corner, whereas half of the girls of the same level answered they spoke: “a lot” (50%) and the other half “a little” (50%) as seen in Figure 3.

Figure 2a. Results for question 1 according to sex and grade



Figure 2b.



As far as qualitative data obtained from question 1: “Why?”. A total of 261 (out of 288) participants answered to this short-open question. They agreed that they liked coming to the EC for various reasons but mostly because: “It was fun” (N=104), followed by “because they learn” (N=39), “because they miss ordinary lessons” (N=28), or “because they like the teacher” (N=27) and finally “because they play” (N=23). Some other spare answers were: “because they speak English” or “because they just like the EC”. Results can be appreciated in Figure 4 as follows.

The last open question to give answer to RQ1 was question number 6: “What do you like best about English Corner? I like...”. A total of 269 participants (out of 288) provided valid answers explaining that what they like the most of the EC is “playing games” (N=124), “learning” (N=51), “the teacher” (N=46). It is important to highlight other answers like: “going to the EC with friends” (N=17) because, even though it is not a high percentage, it was only mentioned in 6th graders level. Please see Figure 5.

Results Based on RQ2

Regarding RQ2 addressed about whether the EC environment really does foster more confidence to speak than the English Classroom, question 4: “How do you feel about speaking English in class?” and question 5: “How do you feel about speaking English in the English Corner?” were designed to discover this. Results show that there are no significant differences. Values are similar in both environments and

Table 1. How much English do they speak in the EC opposed to the English Classroom?

	A lot	%	A little	%	TOTAL
Q 2. English Classroom	191	66.32%	97	33.68%	288
Q 3. English Corner	233	80.90%	55	19.10%	288

participants feel practically the same when they speak English in the EC or in the English Classroom. See Table 2 below.

Figure 3. Results of question 3 according to sex and grade

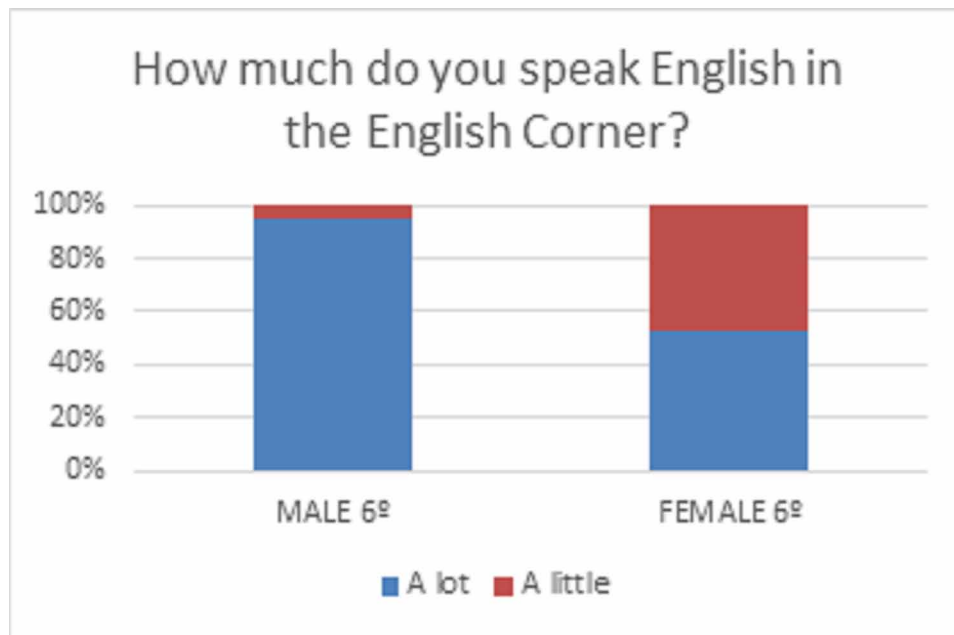


Figure 4. Results of open question 1: "Why?"

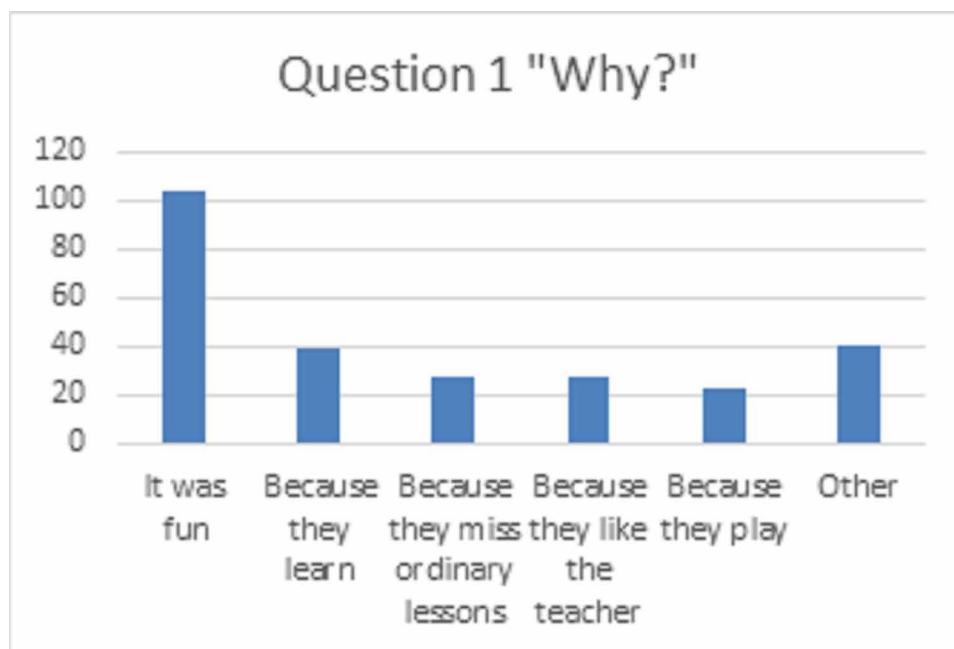


Figure 5. Results of open question 6: “What do you like best about the EC? I like...”



Again, when analysing these results by using the variable “sex” or the variable “grade” no significant differences could be appreciated. The explanation to all these findings will be described and analysed by the authors in the following section of this chapter.

DISCUSSION, SOLUTIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Let’s start discussing results provided to answer RQ 1: “Do Primary School participants in this research consider the English Corner the ideal place to develop their English oral comprehension and production skills?”. Findings clearly demonstrate that the answer to this question is YES. A higher percentage of respondents did favour on the EC environment as a very attractive place and a good informal setting (Feuer, 2009) to foster oral skills and the perfect complement for the English Class at School as it could be appreciated in the analysis of results of the previous section.

Table 2. Results based on RQ2

	Happy/ Confident	%	It's fun	%	Worried	%	I don't speak	%	TOTAL
English Class	161	56.10%	106	36.93%	16	5.57%	4	1.39%	287
English Corner	169	59.09%	99	34.62%	15	5.24%	3	1.05%	286

Note. The variation in the total number of participants (N=288) indicates that one participant did not attend the EC, and another did not answer these two questions.

Notwithstanding, the combination of results between the variable “sex” and the variable “grade” for discussion in RQ 1, indicates that as long as girls grow up from 3rd grade to 6th grade, the percentages of the answer “yes, a lot” decrease to those of “it’s ok” in most of the female participants. In these authors’ opinion this happens because girls’ psycho-social development towards adolescence happens before boys’ psycho-social development (Erikson, 1963). As suggested by this researcher, from twelve years onwards, adolescents need to know who they are and how they fit into society, and this provokes episodes of shyness. This is why, at these ages, females feel shy to speak in front of others, and they also start caring about others’ opinions about them. They are also worried about constructing their own identities (Xuesong, 2009).

As for question 3: How much do you speak English in the EC? analysing the variable “sex” from 3rd to 6th grade, it can be ascertained once more that, girls speak less than boys. The reason why this may happen has already been explained in the previous paragraph. Likewise, other reason explaining why this difference between males and females may occur is that females are much more inclined to compare their self identity with other individuals’ identities, while males are not (Hall & Halberstadt, 1986). When it comes to explore results obtained from question 6: “What do you like best about the EC?” it is worth to mention that in 5th and 6th grades a difference between male and female participants could be appreciated. Only a few boys (N=9) said “games” opposite to a big amount of girls (N=54). These results took these chapter’s researchers attention, but no particular explanation could be found to give answer to them so far.

As regards as RQ 2: “Does the English Corner environment foster more confidence to speak in a foreign language than the ordinary English Classroom?” results show that no statistically significant differences between speaking English in the English Class and in the English Corner were found. Although these authors initially believed that there would be a radically higher percentage of participants who feel more confident to speak in the EC, because there are not many children and they feel less embarrassed, the participant’s answers were surprisingly similar for both environments, the English Class and the English Corner. In these author’s opinion, such results can be justified because students attending FCE School Centres are strongly motivated to speak in a Foreign Language since they are in Pre-Primary School level. All the FCE schools language projects explained in the theoretical background of this chapter as: Let’s talk, Magic Dragon, Magic Drama, etc. implemented in those early stages make young learners feel confident even when there are many students in the classroom. Probably, this is the reason why no big differences were obtained from data collection in this study.

Most impressions and thoughts about the use of the EC to promote oral skills were confirmed by the English Language Assistants. Being the educators most closely involved with the students in the EC, they explained that students do generally appear to be less shy to speak when in a very small group as opposed to in the classroom. The ELAs also considered that participants are less worried about speaking in a FL because when being in the ECs, the situation is much more informal Feuer (2009), and they feel more confident and less afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates. Consequently, thanks to the collaborative nature of this project and multiple participants: the researchers (as English teachers at university), the participants, the ETs at school, the ELAs and the external experts a large amount of information was provided, and different perceptions about the ECs have been analysed.

As previously stated, the answers provided by participants to question 7: “How can we improve English Corner?” were left for this section in which there is room for recommendations, progress and solutions about the issue. From the whole sample, a total of 86 valid answers from 5th and 6th graders were analysed. Answers from lower levels (1st to 4th grade) were not considered because a considerable

lack of consistence was found, or simply because there were no answers at all. From those 86 valid answers the most popular were: “include more games in the EC” (N=18), “to have more time for the EC” (N=16) and “there is nothing to improve” (N=12). Certainly, including games in the classroom is part of the “hands-on” or “active methodologies” which are nowadays being considered by researchers on education with extremely satisfactory results, especially in early stages of education. On the other hand, to have more time for a better quality to fulfil standards of education is a core point that educators are always claiming for. Finally, it is important to mention that some participants felt very happy about the experience as they stated that “there was nothing to improve in the EC”.

Owing that question 7 was an open question, a big amount of different answers was achieved. Some of the following deserve attention as they are an interesting matter to be explored for EC improvements in the future. Those answers (made by 6th graders mainly as explained above) were: “making English crafts” (N=5), “include food and beverages in the EC” and “include English speaking robots in the EC”. All of them demonstrating the participants’ interests for wellbeing, comfort, innovation concerns and the use of new technologies in the teaching and learning process. On the contrary, the only negative point included in question 7 by some participants was that they spent too little time in the EC and that they would prefer to go more frequently and for longer.

It is worth to mention that this research was applied in 2019 before Covid-19 appeared. Nowadays in a post-pandemic educational situation, new and innovative ways of teaching and learning languages have to be explored: Remote Teaching, Online Learning, Flipped Classroom, Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL), just to mention a few... All of them have to be taken into account for the present and the future. Therefore, English Corners can also be transformed into “virtual ones”. So in these author’s opinion English Virtual Corners (EVC) could be included in School Centres’ schedules too, when it comes to planning and preparing teaching guides and programmes for the years to come.

Finally, this does not mean that face-to-face learning settings as the EC at school should be replaced by ICTs and online environments. On the contrary, it has been proved that they favour not only the acquisition of the Linguistic Communication Competence, but also many other basic competences for the future citizens of 21st century. To sum up, and according to Kellaway: “English Corner appears not to be at a crossroads – there is little evidence that social media or online-moderated communication is replacing the need for face to face English practice, rather both are seen as necessary and complementary approaches” (2013, 194).

All these findings can be applied to explore and implement other possibilities within the EC context, as for example: include external guests in the ECs when possible, or prepare authentic cultural activities, and mini-projects could also be developed... An additional possibility which has not been explored yet in this study is to engage higher level language users in the ECs to help as mediators and interact with young learners. This means to make new decisions as for instance how many high or lower level participants would be involved? would it be possible to agree a timetable for all of them? etc. On these author’s opinion, starting a new circle with an action-research perspective is the only way to move forward and face new challenges for successful future education policies.

CONCLUSION

This study has limitations as any others may have. For further research, it can also be added that widening the variables of the sample or even implementing the same study in different types of schools (fully state-

funded, semi state-funded and private), or other schools across the country would be another possibility to discover the effects of the use of the ECs in Primary School to promote oral skills among language learners. Another interesting element which could shed some light for future research of the kind is the language of instruction, in this research is English, but it can be applied to any language of the world, and it can be placed at any plurilingual and multicultural context. Moreover, the use of the ECs could also be implemented in other levels of education; Secondary School, Tertiary level, etc.

The present study provides empirical data on the research question about the English Corner as an appropriate place to promote and facilitate the acquisition of both oral receptive and oral productive skills in a much more natural way. It includes a considerable and homogeneous number of participants (nearly three hundred). The gender of participants was balanced on the whole, and four different grades of Primary Education were scrutinised (3rd to 6th grade), so that it can be ascertained that all data are reliable and therefore, these results ought to be considered for future research in the same field. On the other hand, even though the study described in this chapter as an example was developed in a particular local area in North-Western Spain, it is expected that the use of the EC as a catalyst for Learning Languages in Plurilingual Contexts can be transferred to other similar settings, and can be used by any teacher or educator concerned about fostering language learning.

Therefore, this chapter about the English Corner and its benefits for teaching and learning languages tries to include these author's contribution to the field of research. It is also aimed at assisting researchers, teachers, educators, practitioners, curriculum developers, administrators and policy makers to design, plan and implement plurilingualism, multiculturalism and more systematic practices that promote an effective teaching and learning languages process. This must be done from Early Childhood to higher levels of education, in all diverse contexts, and in all the languages of the world. Finally, these authors' last suggestion considers to change the constricted name of "English Corner" for a much more inclusive one: "Languages Corner", so that all languages and cultures can be included in the same space to foster the Linguistic Communication Competence promoting the development of oral skills and language learning in plurilingual contexts.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Confidence: The ECs provide an informal and welcome setting to make learners feel comfortable for the teaching and learning process.

English Corner (EC): A small room on the school premises decorated with pictures, posters, books, leaflets, *realia*, etc. which can be useful to assist in the Language Learning process with the aim of encouraging informal conversation.

English Language Assistant (ELA): Hired person at school to assist in the English Corners.

English Teacher (ET): The teacher of English language at school.

Fomento Centros de Enseñanza (FCE): A network of state-funded school centres spread all around Spain.

Foreign Language Learning: Any language which is not the mother tongue, and it is learnt outside the family context.

Motivation: Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are key elements to participate in the ECs successfully.

Multilingual Learners: Students learning more than two languages including their first language.

Oral Skills: The ECs are conceived to promote speaking abilities as much as possible.

Researchers: The authors of this research.

ENDNOTES

¹ The authors of this research use the term “English Corner” for both, the original ECs first founded in China, and the ECs implemented in Fomento de Centros de Enseñanza Schools (FCE) in Spain where this study took place.

² As previously mentioned, the interview for the ETs and the ELAs is not formally included in this study.

APPENDIX

Figure 6. The English Corner questionnaire elaborated by Couto-Cantero, P, & Sanderson, H.

I am a 😊 ☐ 😞 ☐

I am in class 3 ☐ 4 ☐ 5 ☐ 6 ☐

1. Do you like coming to the English Corner? (tick)

Yes, a lot. 😊 ☐

It's ok. 😐 ☐

No. 😞 ☐

Why? _____

2. How much do you speak English in class?

A lot ☐

A little ☐

3. How much do you speak English in the English Corner?

A lot ☐

A little ☐

4. How do you feel about speaking English in class?

😊 happy/confident ☐

😄 it's fun ☐

😞 worried ☐

😞 I don't speak ☐

😞😞😞😞😞😞😞 there are too many children so I'm embarrassed

Other _____

5. How do you feel about speaking English in the English Corner?

😊 happy/confident ☐

😄 it's fun ☐

😞 worried ☐

😞 I don't speak ☐

😞😞😞 there aren't many children so I'm not embarrassed 👍

Other _____

6. What do you like best about English Corner? I like _____

7. How can we improve English Corner? _____
