



Associação Portuguesa de Professores de Inglês

## **REPORT**

# **Early Language Learning in Pre-primary Education in Portugal**

Sandie Mourão and Sónia Ferreirinha

**July 2016**

## Table of Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. The Objectives of the Study .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3. Phase 1: The Survey .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3.1 Methodology and data collection .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>3.2 Results: The extent of foreign language provision in pre-primary education .....</b>	<b>4</b>
3.2.1 Number and distribution of foreign language projects.....	5
3.2.2 A curricular or non-curricular foreign language activity.....	6
3.2.3 Duration of foreign language projects .....	6
3.2.4 Starting age for learning a foreign language .....	7
3.2.5 Number and length of foreign language sessions per week .....	7
<b>3.3 Results: A typical foreign language teacher profile .....</b>	<b>9</b>
3.3.1 Who is responsible for the foreign language sessions? .....	9
3.3.2 Resources and activities .....	12
3.3.3 Evidence of good practices.....	13
<b>3.4 Phase 1 summary.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>3.5 Considerations .....</b>	<b>15</b>
3.5.1 Objective and choice of language .....	15
3.5.2 Pre-service teacher education.....	16
3.5.3 In-service teacher education .....	16
3.5.4 A working group .....	16
<b>4. Phase 2: The field work .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>References.....</b>	<b>17</b>

## 1. Introduction

Second and foreign language projects in pre-primary institutions in Europe have been influenced by a European language education policy in the last decade that stresses the importance of ‘teaching at least two foreign languages from a very early age’ (European Commission, 2002: 44). In 2011, the European Commission published a policy handbook to provide guidelines and a set of good practices to support the implementation of language projects in European territory. In this handbook it is recognized that there is ‘little evidence of agreed processes, uniformity of approach or established indicators of achievement in early language learning’ (European Commission, 2011: 14).

The most recent Eurydice report (2012) showed that by September 2015, just over a third of the European community will officially implement second or foreign language projects with children of six years and under, many of these children will still be in pre-primary education and English has been noted as the most popular of languages. According to a British Council Survey (Rixon, 2013) English is indeed cascading into pre-primary education and conference presentations, nationwide surveys, research articles and publications are confirming that English is well established in both state and private sectors often without the support of official legislation. The result is a variety of learning experiences within a range of qualities (see examples in chapters in Mourão & Lourenço, 2015; Murphy & Evangelou, 2016).

In Portugal anecdotal evidence has shown that the situation is likely to be similar, with the annual conference organised by the Portuguese English Teachers’ Association (Associação Portuguesa de Professores de Inglês - APPI) including sessions for and by pre-primary English teachers since April 2000<sup>1</sup>. More recently APPIforma (the association’s professional development centre) has received a higher than normal number of requests for in-service training courses for English in pre-primary institutions, with a view to training both pre-primary professionals and English teachers.

With the recent move in Portugal to make English part of the 1<sup>st</sup> cycle curriculum from September 2015, the lack of reliable information in relation to the situation in Portugal, and the

---

<sup>1</sup> APPInep, a special interest group for pre-primary and primary English teachers in Portugal was created in April 2000. APPI ensures that there are regular focused events, a strand at the annual conference and in-service training for this group of English teachers.

recognition that there is a surge of interest internationally concerning pre-primary language learning, a study '**Early language learning in pre-primary education in Portugal**' was initiated by APPI in collaboration with Dr Sandie Mourão, and supported by the Portuguese Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Portuguese Association for Pre-primary Professionals (Associação de Profissionais de Educação de Infância - APEI).

## **2. The Objectives of the Study**

The study was designed with the following objectives:

1. to understand the extent of foreign language provision in pre-primary education;
2. to establish a typical teacher profile;
3. to collect evidence of different practices and approaches;
4. to gather children's opinions about their foreign language learning experience.

As such it was designed in two phases: first the implementation of an online survey to all pre-primary institutions in mainland Portugal, and second follow up field work, visiting pre-primary institutions, interviewing pre-primary professionals, foreign language teachers, observing foreign language sessions and collecting children's annotated drawings.

## **3. Phase 1: The Survey**

### ***3.1 Methodology and data collection***

An online survey was elaborated by APPI, with collaboration from Dr Sandie Mourão, with a view to obtaining information for the first two objectives. Towards the end of 2014 the survey was sent to the MoE for validation, with the intent of collecting data in early 2015. The validation process took longer than expected and the online survey (using © Survey Monkey) was sent to state and private pre-primary institutions on mainland Portugal in May 2015, with the deadline for responses set at 20 June 2015. The survey link was sent to all public school clusters and private institutions with the instructions that it be completed by the school director and a representative from the pre-primary department.

### ***3.2 Results: The extent of foreign language provision in pre-primary education***

According to information from the MoE the survey was sent to 811 public school clusters with a total of 1406 pre-primary establishments, and 2477 private institutions with a total of 1811 pre-

primary establishments. The response rate was very high for the state sector at 76 per cent, but lower in the private sector at 25 per cent.

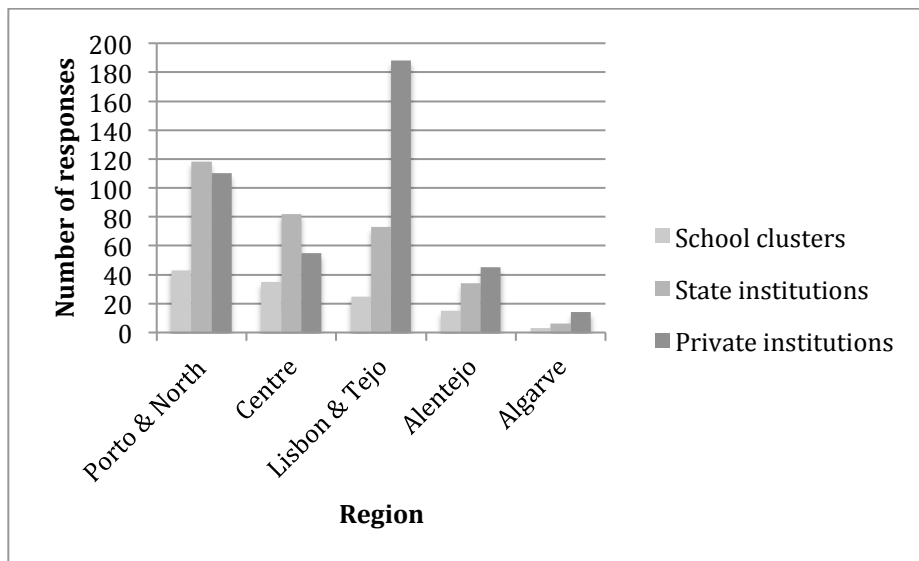
### 3.2.1 Number and distribution of foreign language projects

Three hundred and twenty-four pre-primary establishments in 124 public school clusters and 307 pre-primary establishments from the private sector indicated the existence of a foreign language project. Due to the structure of the Portuguese school clusters it was noted that in many cases not all pre-primary establishments attached to a cluster were involved in the foreign language project.

In all but six responses (under 1 per cent), English was the only foreign language taught. This represents a total of 23 per cent of state pre-primary institutions and 69 per cent of private pre-primary institutions with English projects. Despite the smaller response rate for the private sector we believe this to be representative of reality. The other languages indicated in the responses were second foreign languages and existed in private institutions only – these other languages were Spanish, French, Mandarin and German.

Figure 1 shows the number and distribution of the foreign language projects across mainland Portugal demonstrating that there is greater evidence in both the public and private sectors in the urban areas of Lisbon, Porto and the Northern regions of Portugal, however in Lisbon there is a significantly larger number of private institutions indicating the existence of a foreign language project.

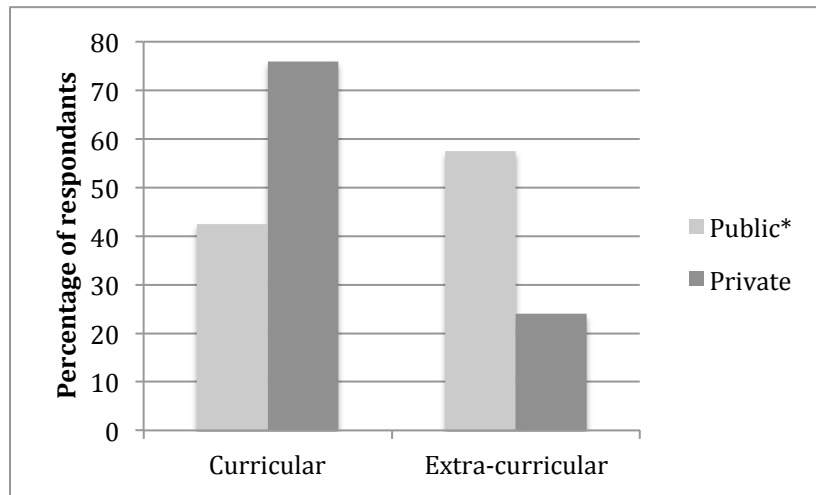
**Figure 1: Number and distribution of foreign language projects by region**



### 3.2.2 A curricular or non-curricular foreign language activity

In the public sector just under 60 per cent of foreign language projects take place during after school activities, and thus considered extra-curricular. They are organized within the local family support programme, *Atividades de Animação e Apoio à Família* (AAAF),<sup>2</sup> which means not all children at the institution attend the classes, as parents are required to pay a small monthly fee. Responsibility for foreign language projects during AAAF were indicated as belonging to a variety of sources ranging from the town council, the school cluster, pre-primary professionals, individual parents and parents’ associations. In the private sector however, nearly 80 per cent of the projects were specified as being curricular, with all children attending. Figure 2 represents these data:

Figure 2: Curricular and extra-curricular foreign language projects



\* School clusters

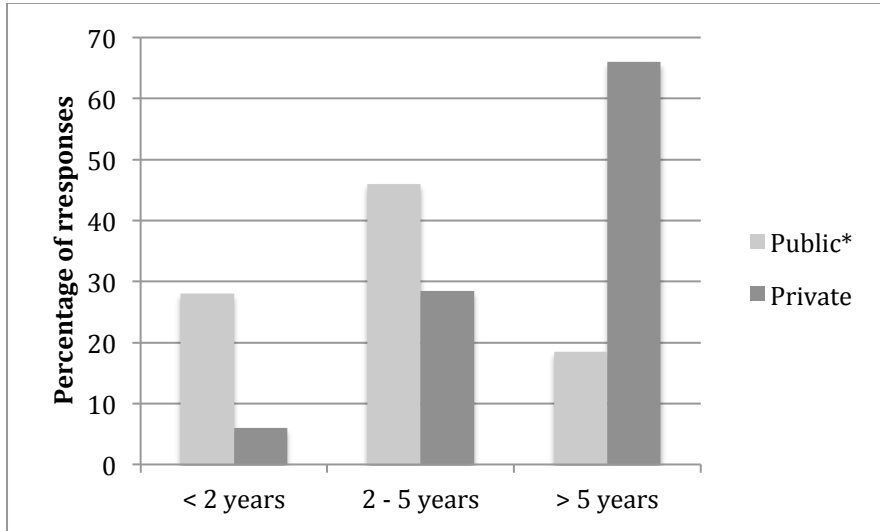
### 3.2.3 Duration of foreign language projects

In the public sector 74 per cent of the foreign language projects have been running for fewer than five years, whereas in the private sector 66 per cent of the foreign language projects have been running for more than five years – see Figure 3. Of the smaller percentage of public schools with longer-standing projects, 25 per cent were indicated as being curricular projects programmed to

<sup>2</sup> *Atividades de Animação e Apoio à Família* (AAAF) functions to support parents and carers so that children can stay in school once the curricular activities have ended. It usually runs from 15.30 to 17.30 and is organised by monitors.

involve all children. The private sector has been actively involved in implementing English projects for longer than the public sector.

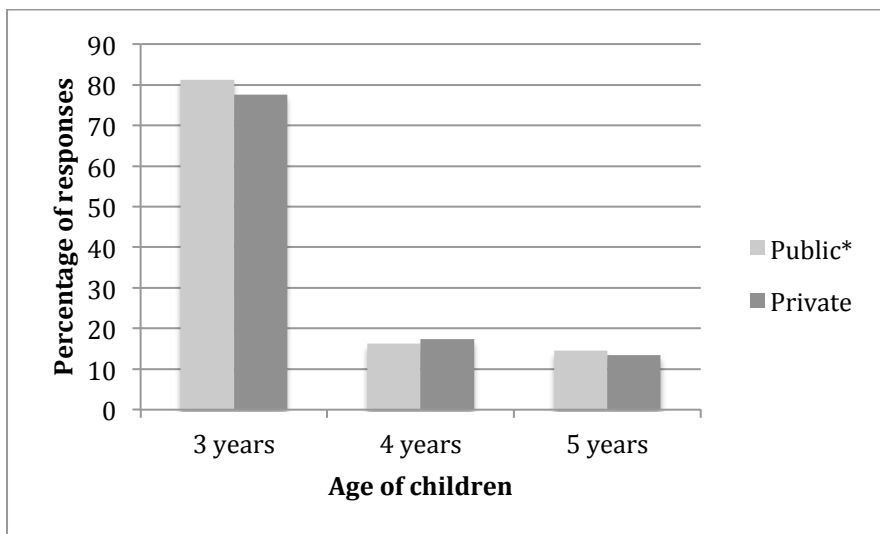
**Figure 3: Duration of foreign language project**



\* School clusters

### 3.2.4 Starting age for learning a foreign language

**Figure 4: Age for initiating a FL**



\* School clusters

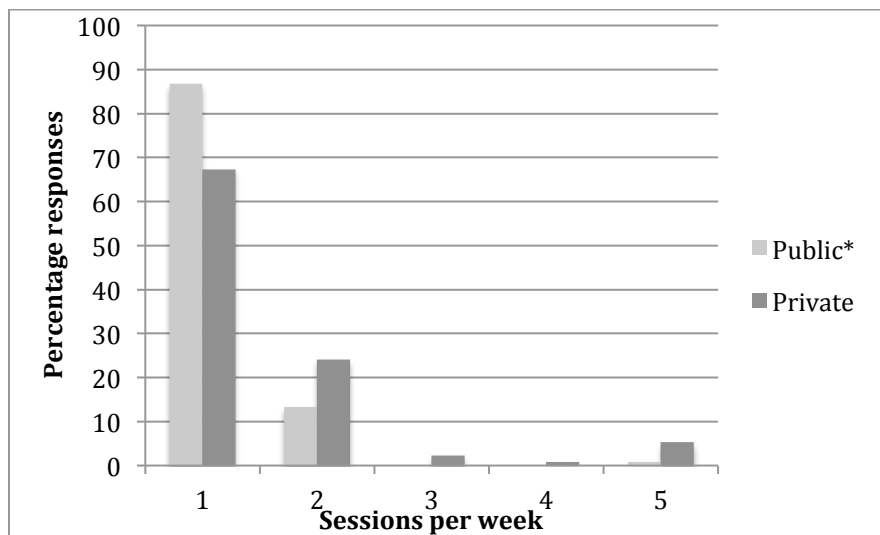
Figure 4 shows very clearly that the vast majority of foreign language projects in both public and private institutions begin when children are 3 years old. In public schools this is due to the fact that class groups of children are made up of mixed ages, between 3 and 5 years old. But in private

institutions children are more often grouped by age, so the pattern in the private sector is slightly different - there is a more focused attempt at ensuring children from the age of 3 are involved in the institution's English project.

### 3.2.5 Number and length of foreign language sessions per week

In Figure 5 it is possible to see that the majority of English projects take place once a week. In the public sector this is over 85 per cent and in the private sector this is around two thirds of the projects. Just under 15 per cent of the projects in the public sector and just under 25 per cent in the private sector have sessions twice a week.

Figure 5: Number of foreign language sessions per week

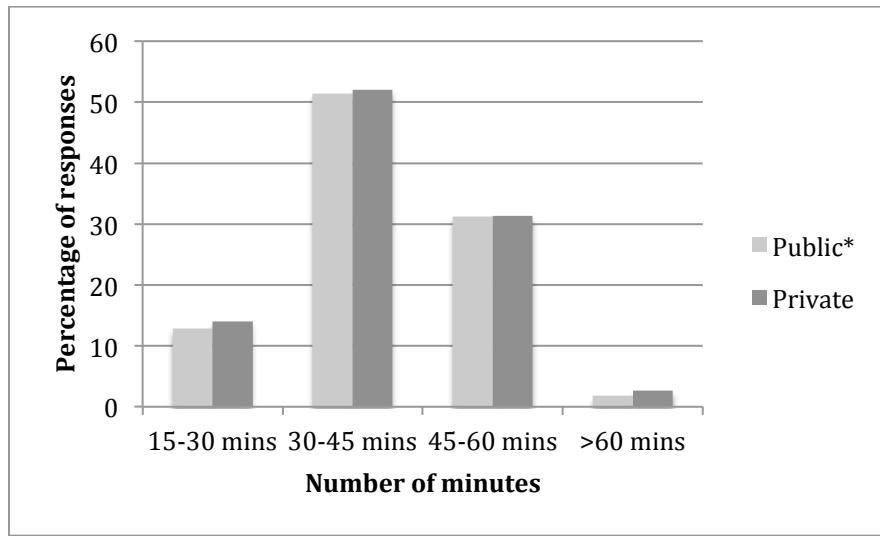


\* School clusters

When the results in Figure 5 are seen together with the those in Figure 6, which shows how long the English sessions last, it is clear that these projects are likely to fall into a low exposure instructed foreign language learning model. In both sectors the results are similar, just over 50 per cent of the responses indicate that sessions last between 30 and 45 minutes, with just over 30 per cent indicating sessions last for 45 to 60 minutes. There is also evidence in these graphs that bilingual projects may exist - one school cluster with seven pre-primary schools in the public sector and 18 institutions in the private sector provide English sessions every day of the week, and in some cases for more than one hour in duration.



**Figure 6: Length of foreign language sessions**

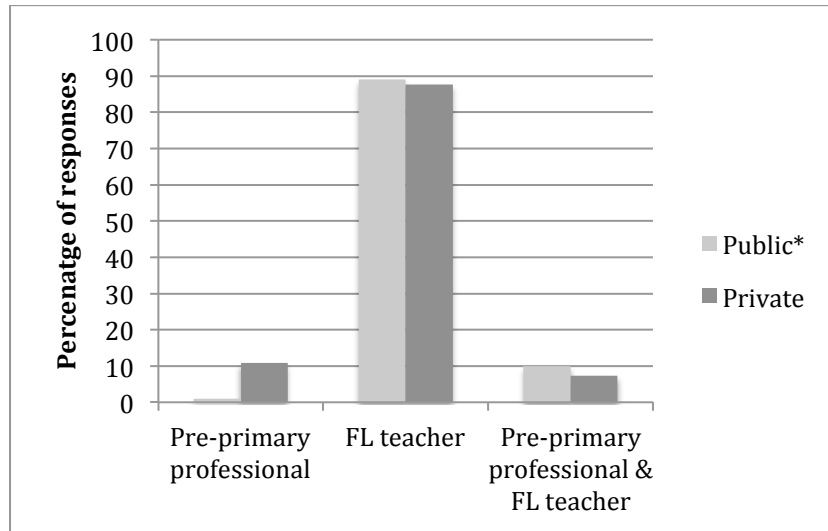


\* School clusters

### 3.3 Results: A typical foreign language teacher profile

#### 3.3.1 Who is responsible for the foreign language sessions?

**Figure 7: The person responsible for giving the foreign language sessions**



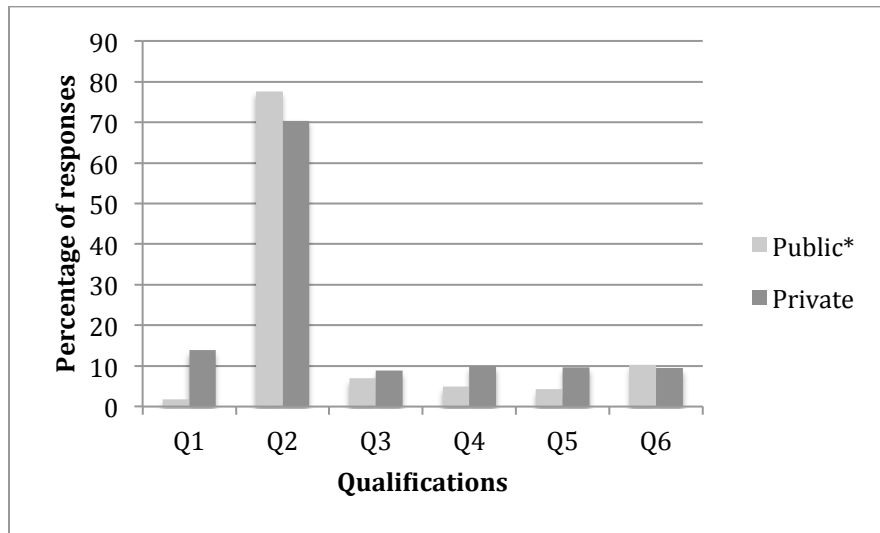
\* School clusters

According to the results in Figure 7, the majority of institutions employ an English teacher to give the English sessions. In both the public and private sector this occurs in just under 90 percent of the responding institutions. To note, 1 per cent of the public sector and just over 10 per

cent of the private sector responses indicated pre-primary professionals are responsible for English and in both sectors between 7 and 10 per cent of the projects are the responsibility of both the educator and the English teacher.

Recommended qualifications and competencies are difficult to ascertain, however European Commission guidelines highlight that ‘the qualification profile of staff working with young children in pre-primary settings has long been recognized as a critical factor for the quality of [these] settings and the children’s experiences. This also holds true for those staff (...) who are supporting early language learning activities’ (2011b: 17). Both pedagogical and language skills are essential for teachers working with such young children, and they require an understanding of the principles of pedagogy and child development as well as being sufficiently confident to speak fluently and spontaneously to children in the L2 using language considered suitable for this age group.

**Figure 8: English teacher qualifications**



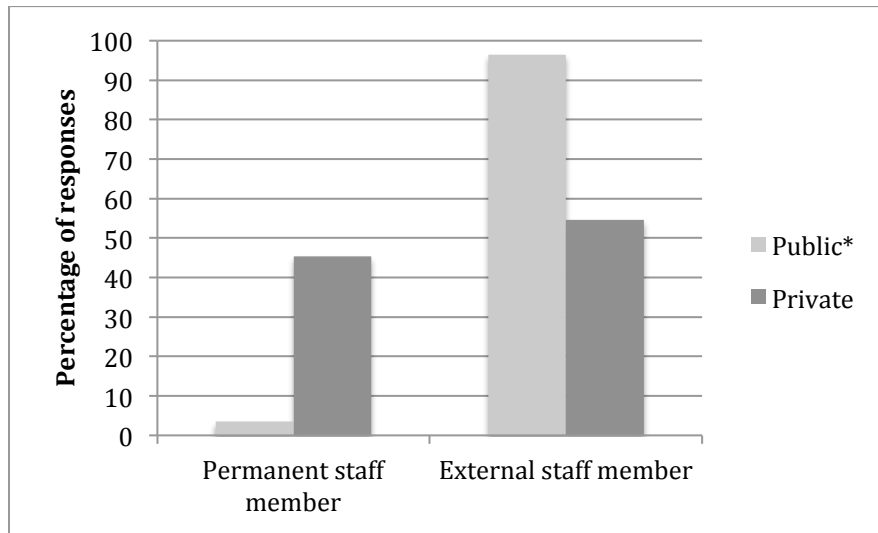
\* School clusters

**Key:** Q1: Degree in pre-primary education / Q2: Degree in FLs / Q3: Other degree / Q4: Native speaker / Q5: Other qualification / Q6: Don't know

The survey question related to the qualifications of the English teachers provided a wide variety of responses (see Figure 8). In the public sector just over 77 per cent were English teachers, who had trained to work with children from 10 to 18 years old. In the public sector this figure was slightly lower at 70 per cent. A negligible 1.7 per cent of the responses indicated that the English

teacher had a degree in pre-primary education in the public sector, with just over 14 per cent in the private sector. Between 7 and 9 per cent of the English teachers had ‘other degrees’ – in the public sector these included degrees in primary education, international relations, communications, and social services. In the private sector the variety was far greater and included degrees in pre-primary and primary education, psychology, art, languages and administration, law, nursing and English literature. Five per cent of the English teachers were native speakers in the public sector and 10 per cent in the private sector. Other qualifications made reference to the teachers’ language qualifications, which ranged from a grade 12 school leaving certificate in English (CEFR<sup>3</sup> level B2) to the Cambridge proficiency certificate (CEFR level C2). Around 10 per cent of the respondents in both the public and private sectors declared they were not aware of the foreign language teacher’s qualifications.

**Figure 9: Professional situation of staff responsible for the foreign language sessions**



\* School clusters

Figure 9, shows the results in relation to the professional situation of the staff responsible for the foreign language project - are they a permanent member of staff and the English sessions are one of a number of duties they are responsible for within the institution, or are they peripatetic, external staff members, visiting the institution for the English sessions only? Around 96 percent of the English teachers in the public sector were recorded as being external staff

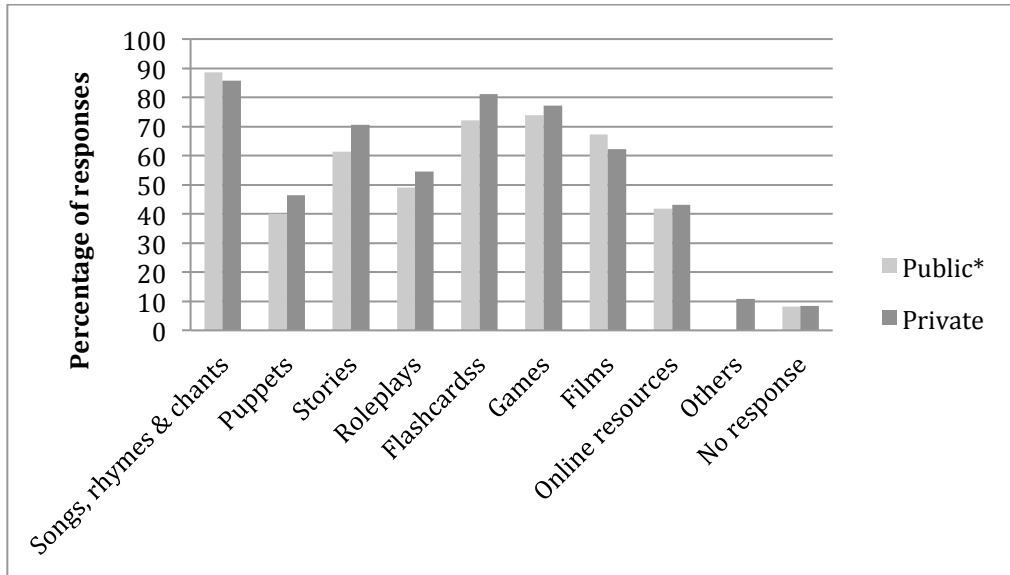
<sup>3</sup> Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) measures a person’s linguistic competence beginning at A1 moving upwards through A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2, with C2 representing native-speaker proficiency.

members. This may be the result of a higher percentage of public sector English projects running after school and thus organised by external entities (e.g. town or parish councils and or parent associations). English teachers in these situations are usually contracted by these other entities as part-time teachers working with green receipts. There was a striking difference between the public and private sector figures where, in the latter, just over 45 percent were permanent staff members. It should be noted that a project that involves external members of staff is unlikely to be as successful in its outcomes as a result of the difficulties encountered in organising staff meetings for planning, and connecting and integrating the children’s learning experiences.

### 3.3.2 Resources and activities

Guidelines for teachers with regard to how they should go about introducing a foreign language in pre-primary education (see Dunn, 2014; Ferreirinha, 2014; Mourão, 2014; Slattery, 2008; Ward & Reilly, 1997) suggest the use of puppets, songs, rhymes and chants, stories and game-like activities. Teachers are also encouraged to use visuals accompanied by mime and dramatization. Figure 10 shows the results from the responses regarding this question in the survey. A list of items was provided for respondents to check, establishing that these resources or activities were used in their institutions.

**Figure 10: Resources and activities used in the foreign language sessions**



\* School clusters

There was very little difference between the public and private sectors. The most popular resource was the songs, chants and rhymes item, selected by around 85 per cent in each sector. Flashcards, games, stories and films were noted by between 60 and 80 per cent, and dramatizations, puppets and online resources by 40 to 55 per cent. Considering the requirements of children of this age, all these resources and activities are important and should be evident in all contexts. Thus, it is worrying that 15 per cent of the teachers were indicated as not singing songs and worse, 60 per cent were not using puppets.

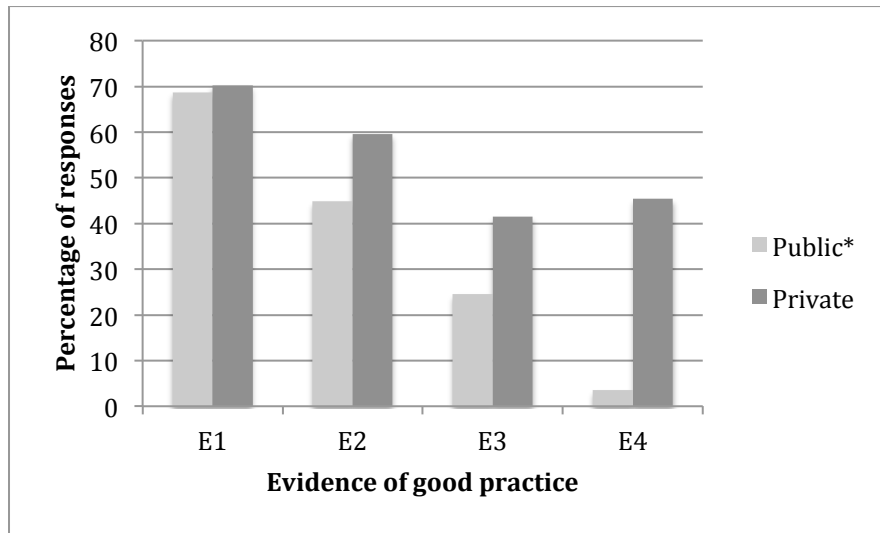
In the original survey sent to the MoE for approval, the list of items to select included textbooks. This item was removed, as textbooks are not recommended in pre-primary education. Nevertheless, respondents mentioned the use of textbooks in 'Other' resources. Ten per cent of the respondents from the private sector selected 'Other' resources of which two thirds confirmed, using the comment tool, that textbooks or worksheets were used in their institutions. There is a proliferation of published resources available through the national and international pre-primary English Language Education market. These publications can, if well selected, provide a very useful support, not to mention valuable resources (a puppet, flashcards, audios, story cards, etc.) for a teacher who has little experience in the pre-primary classroom, and it is hardly surprising that they are being used, especially in schools where English is a curricular subject for all children.

### **3.3.3 Evidence of good practice**

The European Commission guidelines quite clearly recommend that early language learning 'be integrated into contexts in which the language is meaningful and useful, such as in everyday or playful situations, since play is the child's natural medium of learning in pre-primary' (2011: 14). Robinson, Mourão and Kang (2015) also suggest a 'holistic and integrated approach to the teaching of English at pre-primary level' (p. 29), combining teacher-led activity and child-initiated play in the foreign language. Thus, one of the objectives of the survey was to begin to collect evidence of different practices and approaches, in particular those which allowed for integration of the foreign language projects as well as collaborative practices, which have also been shown to increase and enrich the opportunities for children to learn in a manner which is appropriate to their stage of development (Mourão & Robinson, 2016: 262).

Naturally, if a pre-primary professional is responsible for a foreign language project it is likely that the project will be integrated into his / her daily practices and planning. However, results thus far show that the majority of English teachers are not pre-primary professionals. Projects of a curricular nature are also more likely to provide opportunities for collaboration resulting in an integrated foreign language project. With this in mind the responses pointing to curricular English projects were further analyzed with a view to collecting additional evidence of integration. The four practices considered supportive of an integrated approach would be 1) joint planning, realization and assessment of the foreign language project between educator and foreign language teacher; 2) the pre-primary professional participating in the English sessions; 3) the existence of an English learning area in the children’s classroom and 4) the English teacher being a permanent staff member. Figure 11 provides the results related to these four questions in the survey.

**Figure 11: Possible evidence of good practice in the curricular foreign language projects**



\* School clusters

**Key:** **E1:** Educators and foreign language teachers plan, implement and assess together; **E2:** Educator participates in the foreign language sessions; **E3:** There is foreign language learning area in the classroom; **E4:** The teacher is a permanent staff member.

From figure 11 we can see that in curricular English programmes, both the public and private sectors indicated a fairly high proportion of joint planning, implementation and assessment of the English project, just under 70 per cent in both cases. In relation to the pre-primary professional remaining in the classroom during the foreign language sessions, in the state sector just over 44 per cent indicated this practice and in the private sector around 60 per cent.

Regarding the existence of a learning area devoted to English - in the public sector this was signalled in just under 25 per cent of the responding institutions and in the private sector, in as many as 41 per cent. In relation to whether the English teacher is a permanent member of staff, as we have already seen, in the public sector this is highly unusual, and was noted by 3.5 per cent of the respondents. In the private sector it was a more frequent occurrence and, in curricular projects only, was shown to be just over 45 per cent. We can conclude from these results that the private sector shows evidence of more appropriate practice in relation to learning English in pre-primary education.

### ***3.4 Phase 1 summary***

To summarise this first phase, we have seen that English is selected as the first foreign language in 46 per cent of the pre-primary institutions that responded to the survey in mainland Portugal. English projects in the main begin when children are 3 years old and are most likely to be considered language exposure programmes, the objective of which is to 'prepare and help children to learn a new language' (European Commission, 2011: 15). In the main, children receive a restricted amount of exposure to English in a classroom setting, in most cases provided by an English teacher who has little or no training to work with children in early childhood education and care, and who is not likely to be a permanent member of staff at the school. There appears to be some evidence of good practice, but this can only be confirmed with school visits in Phase 2 of the project.

Results from this survey also indicate that there is no such thing as equal opportunity when it comes to learning a foreign language in pre-primary education in Portugal – it would appear that a child attending a private pre-primary institution is more likely to receive an education that includes an integrated English language project than a child attending a public institution.

### ***3.5 Considerations***

Taking this first phase into consideration we would like to make the following suggestions.

#### **3.5.1 Objective and choice of language**

The study did not require that respondents indicate reasons for their choice of English as the foreign language for their project, however this is a question which schools should consider

carefully when deciding to plan for a foreign language project. If indeed the objectives align with a sensitization model, exposing children to other languages to support a more plurilingual education, then it would be more appropriate to include languages other than English. Being exposed to any number of languages at this early age is seen as beneficial (see Lourenço & Andrade, 2015). We would like to suggest that this be taken into consideration when planning for an early language learning project in pre-primary education.

### **3.5.2 Pre-service teacher education**

We consider it would be pertinent to begin including a module on early language learning in pre-service courses for pre-primary professionals and language teachers. These modules should cover such topics as language learning approaches and methodologies for small children, second language development and child development, with an emphasis on collaborative methodologies involving both a pre-primary professional and a language teacher.

### **3.5.3 In-service teacher education**

We suggest that accredited in-service professional development courses be established for pre-primary professionals and language teachers to support and develop the implementation of a pre-primary early language learning project. As such, APPI and APEI have successfully begun a formal collaboration by running a one-day workshop and a 25-hour accredited course for pre-primary professionals and English teachers in Lisbon during 2016, with plans for future collaboration.

### **3.5.4 A working group**

We would like to suggest that a working group create a set of guidelines for early language learning in pre-primary education in Portugal to ensure that projects are designed which suit this age group and which share a variety of possible practices and approaches. Results from Phase 2 of this research project should be fed into these guidelines.

## **4. Phase 2: The field work**

Phase 2 of the study consisted of follow up fieldwork, visiting schools, interviewing pre-primary professionals and English teachers and, when possible, observing classes and collecting annotated



drawings from children. Unfortunately as the Phase 1 survey was only sent to institutions in May 2015 with a closing deadline of late June, most pre-primary institutions were about to close for summer holidays upon completion of Phase 1. Phase 2 of the study was thus considerably hindered. Nevertheless some fieldwork did take place and continued into the second and third terms of the school year 2105/2016. This data is still being analyzed and will be published in due course.

## References

- Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dunn, O. (2013). *Introducing English to Young Children: Spoken Language*. London: Collins.
- European Commission, (2002). *Presidency Conclusions* - Barcelona 15 -16 March 2002. Available online: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf)
- European Commission, (2011). *Language Learning at Pre-primary School Level: Making it Efficient and Sustainable. A Policy Handbook*. Brussels: European Commission. Available online: [http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/language-policy/documents/early-language-learning-handbook\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/languages/policy/language-policy/documents/early-language-learning-handbook_en.pdf)
- Eurydice (2012). *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012*, Brussels: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.
- Ferreirinha, S. (2014). *Nursery Rhymes: Contributos para o Desenvolvimento da Literacia e Aquisição de uma Segunda Língua (Inglês) na Educação Pré-Escolar*. Unpublished masters dissertation, Nova University Lisbon.
- Gregório, C., Perdigão, R. & Casas-Novas, T. (2013). *Relatório Técnico – Integração do ensino da língua inglesa no currículo do 1º ciclo do Ensino Básico*. Lisboa: Conselho Nacional de Educação. [http://www.cnedu.pt/content/noticias/CNE/RelatorioTecnico\\_final.pdf](http://www.cnedu.pt/content/noticias/CNE/RelatorioTecnico_final.pdf)
- Lourenço, M. & Andrade, A.I. (2015). *Educar Para a Diversidade e Desenvolver a Consciência Fonológica: Propostas Pedagógico-Didáticas Para o Jardim de Infância*. Aveiro: Universidade de Aveiro.
- Mourão, S. (2014). 'Fostering child-initiated play in pre-primary classrooms'. *ELT Journal Special Issue Teaching English to Young Learners*, 68/3, pp. 254-264

- Mourão, S. & Lourenço, M. (Eds.) (2015). *Early Years Second Language Education: International Perspectives on Theories and Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Mourão, S. and Robinson, P. (2016). Facilitating the learning of English through collaborative practice, in Victoria Murphy and Maria Evangelou (eds), *Early Childhood Education in English for Speakers of Other Languages*, London: British Council.
- Murphy, V.A., and Evangelou, M., (eds), (2016). *Early Childhood Education in English to Speakers of Other Languages*, London: British Council. Available online:  
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/early-childhood-education-english-speakers-other-languages>
- Reilly, V. and Ward, S. (1997). *Very Young Learners*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rixon, S. (2013). *British Council Survey of Policy and Practice in Primary English Language Teaching Worldwide*. London: British Council. Available online:  
<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/british-council-survey-policy-practice-primary-english-language-teaching-worldwide>
- Robinson, P., Mourão, S, and Kang, N.-J. (2015). *English Learning Areas in Pre-Primary Classrooms: An investigation of their effectiveness in supporting foreign language development*, London: British Council. Available online: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/english-learning-areas-pre-primary-classrooms-investigation-their-effectiveness>
- Slattery, M. (2008). *Teaching with Bear*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.