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# A profile of students pursuing a Degree in Primary Education, Foreign Language Track

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores the profile of a group of students who are enrolled in the Degree Programme for Primary Education, English as a Foreign Language Track. In particular, this research analyses their previous linguistic knowledge, their perception of the linguistic competence of a primary school English teacher, and their perception on their own linguistic competence. The findings for this research show that the students' linguistic competence at the beginning of their studies is far from their perception of the linguistic competence that a primary-school English teacher should have. Another important finding reveals how their perception of the English language and the teaching of English will affect their decision when choosing this degree. The sample was 38 students enrolled in the fourth year of this particular degree in three consecutive years (2017/2018, 2018/2019, 2019/2020). The research tool was an ad hoc, 33-item questionnaire that was administered online. This paper uses a quantitative approach and data were analysed with descriptive statistics: Kruskal-Wallis one-factor and U-Mann Whitney. This investigation emphasises the important role of foreign-language linguistic competence in the training of primary-school English teachers.

*Keywords:* primary education, students' perception, teacher training, English as a foreign language, linguistic competence

## **Introduction**

This research paper analyses the profile of a group of students who are enrolled in the Degree of Primary Education, English as a Foreign Language Track. It is a continuation of other studies that have been published in this area (Fernández-Viciano & Fernández-Costales, 2017; Martínez-Agudo, 2017; Fernández-Viciano et al., 2018; Ramos-García & Fernández-Viciano, 2019). This research is relevant since the teaching of English to young learners is of crucial importance; the training of those teachers who will instruct future generations is a key element. Research carried out in the last decades has

shown that the linguistic preparation of foreign language teachers in Spain falls behind that in other European member states (Eurydice 2006, 2012; European Commission, 2012a, 2012b).

Therefore, the aims of the present investigation explore the profile of a group of preservice, primary English teachers through the data obtained related to their English preparation, as well as their perceptions regarding their own linguistic competence and the linguistic competence that a primary school English teacher should have. These data will not only affect the particular, decisive moment when they choose to pursue this degree, but also impact their teaching competence.

The current investigation was conducted among students at the University of Oviedo. More precisely, the sample is formed by students attending the Degree of Primary Education, English as a Foreign Language Track at Facultad Padre Ossó.

Founded in 1965, Facultad Padre Ossó is a private faculty affiliated with the University of Oviedo. It is a Faculty of Education where undergraduates study for a Degree in Primary Education, to mention one opportunity, while specialising in one of these tracks: Physical Education, Hearing and Speech, Special Education, and English as a Foreign Language. In 2010, Facultad Padre Ossó adapted its degrees to the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). As a result of adapting to the EHEA expectations, the training of preservice teachers was reduced to 240 ECTs (European Credit Transfer System).

No matter what specialisation they choose in their third year, all students will take an English course, English I (6 ECTs), in the first year of their studies. In the third and fourth year, those who choose the track of English as a Foreign Language will take the following linguistic courses: English Communication for the Global Classroom I and II (6 ECTs each) and the methodological courses of English Learning Strategies and Playful Activities in the English Classroom, (6 ECTs each). Students then complete their training with the course Practicum, totaling 12 ECTs. Therefore, the English as a Foreign Language Track equals 24 ECTs, which is 17.5% of the credits of the Degree of Primary Education. Only 12 ECTs credits (7.5%) are devoted to their English preparation, a number that seems very low in light of the fact that these teachers will be in charge of educating future generations in the English language.

Based on the aims of this research paper, several key aspects in the field of English as a Foreign Language in primary education will be covered.

The first area regards the linguistic competence of students attending the Degree of Primary Education, English as a Foreign Language Track. Spaniards are well-known for their lack of command of foreign languages. Research conducted by the European Commission (2012a, 2012b) reflects that only 18% of Spanish people are likely to speak a foreign language. As a result, speaking is an obstacle for many Spanish speakers while achieving

oral fluency is quite a challenge for those whose speaking skills are needed as a working tool. This phenomenon also proves true in the case of preservice, primary English teachers.

Researchers have been analysing the possible causes for this low oral competence in a foreign language. Fernández-Costales and González-Riaño (2018) and Rubio and Martínez-Lirola (2013) find that it might lie in the lack of linguistic immersion in the classroom because very few oral activities are carried out. Other causes pinpoint the practice of dubbing films instead of subtitling, or the fact that Spanish is one of the most spoken languages in the world.

The second key aspect of this paper examines students' perception of the linguistic competence needed to be a primary-school English teacher. The current programme of Primary Education, English as a Foreign Language Track at Facultad Padre Ossó prepares students to achieve a B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by the end of their studies. Upon completing their studies, teachers will look for a position in an educational system where bilingual schools have appeared everywhere (Madrid & Roa, 2018). Bilingual schools demand teachers who are not only able to teach the language, but also use it as a medium of instruction. Primary teachers will be asked to teach subjects such as Physical Education, Arts and Crafts, or Science. For this precise reason, the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports developed the Comprehensive Programme on Foreign Language Learning 2010/2020 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, 2011), which establishes that a C1 level is required to teach English.

Students are aware of this situation and their perception of their linguistic preparation does not meet their expectations since a B2 level does not appear sufficient (Barrios, 2006; Rubio & Martínez-Lirola, 2013; Jover et al., 2016;). This lack is the reason they decide to continue their linguistic training by their own means (Ramos-García & Fernández-Viciano, 2019), a choice that ushers in the third key aspect covered in this research paper: how primary English teachers perceive their linguistic preparation.

In addition to the factors mentioned above, researchers have weighed other aspects that may influence the important decision of choosing education as a profession. The teaching profession is considered vocational. This job offers the opportunity to make positive changes in people's lives, a possibility that is directly linked to the motivational factors that influence students' choice of the teaching profession (Pan & Say, 2017).

Literature classifies motivational factors into three categories: 1) intrinsic motivation, which covers aspects of the job activity. The factors related to individuals' personal interests and intellectual fulfilment are crucial. 2) Extrinsic motivation includes elements that are related to obtaining a reward such as material benefits, social status, or holidays. 3) Altruistic motivation is linked to the activity of teaching children as a way of taking part in their

growth, development, and success. Within this framework, teaching is seen as a socially worthwhile and important job (Chong & Low, 2009; Balyer & Özcan, 2014; Padhy et al., 2015). Intrinsic and altruistic motivation seem to be more important for teachers than extrinsic motivation because teaching as a profession fulfils teachers' expectations and leaves economic factors in second place (Amengual-Pizarro & García-Laborada, 2017). Gagne and Deci (2005) state that motivation is crucial because teachers who show more interest and enthusiasm are more effective.

Additionally, students' own perceptions of their L2 language competence also have a psychological impact on their performance. Mastering the language will allow these preservice teachers to be good at teaching English while promoting their confidence and self-efficacy (Bandura 1997; Prieto, 2001; Chacón, 2006), a construct that has a direct impact on their effectiveness in the classroom.

Lastly, students may sometimes base their career choice on their own experiences in primary school. Some of these experiences may have proven significant when choosing these studies (Padhy et al., 2015). This type of an experience would additionally have a direct impact on students' beliefs regarding the teaching profession (Borg, 2003, 2006).

## Methodology

In order to meet the objectives and verify their empirical evidence, this research was performed through a cross-sectional survey administered online (Ato et al., 2013; Materola & Otzen, 2014). A descriptive comparative and correlational study was used (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014).

### *Instrument*

An ad hoc survey comprising 33 items was developed. This survey was filled in anonymously by the participants. The instrument was validated by four lecturers who are experts in the methods of teaching English as a foreign language. The reliability analysis shows that Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is 0.664, an acceptable score in initial exploratory research like this, thereby underlining a good degree of internal consistency in the items.<sup>1</sup>

The survey includes five sections that were added with the intent of collecting data from participants: 1) participants' demographics; 2) information about their previous studies; 3) accredited level of English; 4) motivation for choosing this degree; 5) beliefs about English language training. The survey was administered online to facilitate access. Google Drive<sup>2</sup> and the respondents' voluntary participation was guaranteed.

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we are conducting exploratory research in an initial analysis that will be expanded by means of comparative research done on an international scale.

<sup>2</sup> <http://bit.ly/2F77P0g>

The survey includes the following variables:

- a) Participants' demographics
- b) Data about their interest in the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track
- c) Desired level of English competence
- d) Characteristics of a primary-school English teacher
- e) Perception of their own aptitudes and attitudes as students as well as teachers.

### *Sample*

The sample represents the students enrolled in the Foreign Language track of the Degree of Primary Education in the three consecutive years: G1: 2017/18 (51.4%), G2: 2018/19 (27%), G3: 2019/2020 (21.6%). The participants comprised a total of 38 students who were all pursuing their fourth year in the Primary School teaching degree.

While this number may seem a reduced sample, data gathered by the Ministry of Universities (2019/2020) show that the number of students attending the Primary Education degrees offered by the faculties that belong to the University of Oviedo (Facultad Padre Ossó and Facultad de Formación del Profesorado y Educación) totals 1,062, which means that only between 6% or 7% enrol in the Foreign Language track.

56.8% of the participants were women and 43.2% were men; their average age was 25.31. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the sample:

**Table 1.**

*Characteristics of the participants*

Variable	G 1%	G 2%	G 3%	G TOTAL%
Access to University				
Baccalaureate	84.2	90.0	87.5	86.5
Professional training	-----	-----	12.5	2.7
Others	15.8	10.0	-----	10.8
Type of school				
Public	73.7	60.0	50.0	64.9
State-subsidised	21.1	20.0	37.5	2.7
Private	5.3	20.0	12.5	10.8
Exam to Access University				
Yes	94.7	90.0	87.5	91.9
No	5.3	10.0	12.5	8.1
Accredited level of English				
None	31.6	30.0	25.0	29.7
B1	36.8	30.0	25.0	32.4
B2	21.1	30.0	50.0	29.7
C1	10.5	10.0	-----	8.1

Accredited Institution				
EOI	36.8	-----	12.5	25.0
Trinity	5.3	30.0	25.0	18.8
Cambridge	31.6	30.0	37.5	37.5
Others	-----	40.0	25.0	18.8

It is important to emphasise that missing data are less than 10%, which is less than 50% of the total. According to the literature, this is not an obstacle in carrying out the analysis and the corresponding interpretation of the results (Fernández et al., 2018).

### ***Data analysis and Results***

A quantitative, comparative descriptive design was chosen. By adopting this design, the researchers obtained relevant data regarding the profile of the students completing this degree, including their previous linguistic training, perception of the linguistic competence of a primary-school English teacher and opinion of their own level of preparedness. Other aspects, such as their difficulties in the teaching and learning of English, the teaching competence they hope to develop, as well as the attitudes and aptitudes that primary English teachers should possess, were also obtained.

The Kruskal-Wallis test of a factor enabled us to analyse the variables that relate to their learning of English while the Mann-Whitney U test allowed for the comparison of independent samples. The grouping variable has been recoded in two values: 1) a positive perception towards the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track; 2) a less positive perception. The results have been grouped into two broad categories: 1) their perception of the Degree in Primary Education, Foreign Language Track; 2) participants' opinion about the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track.

### ***Participants' perception about the Degree in Primary Education Foreign Language Track***

#### ***Results according to participants' English competence***

86.5% of the participants study English by their own means. This data show how little the participants are satisfied with their English competence and their interest in improving their language ability in order to be successful professionals, a factor that other researchers have already pointed out (Rubio & Martínez-Lirola, 2010; Barrios, 2006; Aguilar, 2013; Amengual-Pizarro, 2013; Rubio & Martínez-Lirola, 2013; Jover et al., 2016).

#### ***Results according to their interest in English***

70.3% affirm that they like English a lot or very much; 75.5% consider that they are good or very good at English; 49.4% state they have carried out



other studies related to English; and 59.5% have been to English-speaking countries. Only 29.7% have spent more than three months in an English-speaking nation.

#### *Results according to their interests in this degree*

89.9% of the participants have chosen this degree because they consider that it offers good job opportunities; 62.2% affirm that it also allows them to work abroad.

#### *Results according to the desirable level of English*

59.5% of the participants affirm that the desirable level of a primary English teacher should be B2, whereas 35.1% consider that it should be C1.

#### *Results according to the characteristics of a primary English teacher*

Once participants were asked about the main characteristics of primary English teachers, 43% pointed out linguistic and methodological competence and training. 21.6% indicated the aspects of creativity, keeping oneself updated, and being innovative. 16.2% referred to the qualities of being empathetic while 21.6% mentioned being motivating. 16.2% thought it important to be flexible and, finally, 24.3% highlighted the importance of being energetic.

#### *Results according to the linguistic competence*

As regards the participants' responses to their accredited level, they reveal that 32.4% achieved a B1 level, 29.7% a B2 level, and only 8.1% a C1 level. Once respondents were asked about their usage of different language skills, the results demonstrate the importance given to the different skills. 64.8% of the participants considered oral comprehension important while 56.7% underscored the need for oral expression. 48.6% emphasised oral interaction. Another 35.1% selected written expression while 27% chose written comprehension. These results show that oral skills are essential for this sample since 40.5% hold oral interaction above all other skills while, for another 59.5%, oral expression represents an aspect that a primary English teacher should master.

#### *Teaching competence*

Participants were also asked about the teaching competence of a primary English teacher. 45.9% highlight the need for teaching methodology and knowledge and 27% pinpoint the factor of interaction with students.

## ***Participants' opinion about the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track.***

### *Training received*

The results show that 40.5% of the informants believe that this track should train preservice teachers in the four skills of the English language. 18.9% believe classroom management is also important to acquire; 13.5% would appreciate learning aspects of the English culture. Other aspects considered by the participants totalled 10.8% for grammar aspects, 10.8% for oral expression and interaction, and 5.4% for oral fluency.

### *Difficulties while learning English*

37.8% of the informants affirm that pronunciation is the most difficult aspect in learning English while 21.6% think that the most difficult aspect is grammar and 10.8% found writing to be the most challenging.

### *Difficulties in teaching English*

88.1% felt it difficult to maintain a conversation. 21.6% chose grammar as the most difficult aspect to teach. For 18.9%, pronunciation was chosen as the greatest teaching obstacle.

Table 2 shows the data obtained from the Kruskal-Wallis, one-factor test regarding students' perception of the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track. Only four variables have obtained a significant relation. This result shows that the participants' perception towards the language is the main reason why they possess a positive perception towards the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track. (Table 2.)

**Table 2.**

*Results of the analysis of Kruskal-Wallis one-factor*

Variables	Average	Chi-square	SIG./P
I like English No, I don't Yes, I do	6.0 22.0	23.184	.000
I am good at English No Yes	9.18 20.33	10.989	.001
I like teaching English No Yes	8.82 20.52	12.144	.000
I would like to work abroad No Yes	11.95 18.88	4.088	.043



Table 3 reflects the data obtained from U Mann-Whitney for independent samples after analysing the participants' perception towards English. The results obtained follow the same lines as the previous analysis and highlight the importance that the sample gives to English, not only when selecting their degree of studies, but also when considering an experience in the foreign labour market. (Table 3.)

**Table 3.**  
*Results of the analysis of U Mann-Whitney for independent samples*

Variables	Average	Chi-square	SiG./P
I like English No, I don't Yes, I do	66.00 462.00	66.000	.000
I am good at English No Yes	101.00 427.00	35.000	.001
I like teaching English No Yes	97.00 431.00	31.000	.000
I would like to work abroad No Yes	131.50 396.50	65.000	.046

The results obtained related to other variables, such as age, sex or academic year, have not been considered of importance for the purpose of this study. (Table 3.)

### Discussion and Conclusion

The first objective of this study is to analyse the linguistic preparation of the students completing the Degree in Primary Education, English as a Foreign Language Track in three consecutive years 2017/18 (G1), 2018/19 (G2), and 2019/2020 (G3). The results show that the participants' level of English is intermediate. The total results (G1+G2+G3) reveal that 32.4% possess a B1 level and 29.7% a B2. Only 8.1% have attained a C1 level; this result only refers to the G1 and G2 groups, since no student has achieved such a level in G3. These data are discouraging since they display a reality that is far from the level of aptitude that the sample expresses as necessary for an English primary teacher to achieve, not to mention its distance from the level established by authorities.

The Degree in Primary Education, English as a Foreign Language Track prepares preservice primary teachers to achieve a B2 level; although some prepare on their own, there is no evidence that students will reach this

desired level while at university. It can only be hoped that they will continue to work toward achieving a C1 level after they finish their degree studies.

Consequently, it is clear that the linguistic training offered by the degrees in primary education is not enough. The reduction of credits in the linguistic subjects does not allow students to become as prepared as they should be in order to teach in the bilingual system where they will not only teach English but also use it as a medium of instruction. Nowadays, primary-school students start their instruction at early ages and are exposed to more hours of English within and beyond the school environment. Travel, television, and social networks help these primary school students improve their L2 skills. For this reason, teachers who are linguistically well-prepared are not merely a necessity, but of vital importance. It is essential that they master aspects such as grammar, vocabulary, and other factors such as culture or pronunciation. The thought that these preservice teachers will be the teachers of future generations is alarming (Rubio & Martínez-Lirola, 2013).

The second objective of this research is to analyse students' perception of their own linguistic competence. Participants displayed concern for their linguistic preparation. Results show that 40.5% of the informants highlight that the degree should train them in the four skills of the English language, an aspect that has also been noted by previous researchers (Barrios, 2006; Rubio & Martínez, 2013; Jover et al., 2016). It is clear that 18 ECTS are not sufficient for these students since 86.5% state that they continue their preparation by their own means, either while they complete their studies at university or once they finish them. Apparently, their linguistic preparation does not reach their expectations. These results therefore reinforce those attained by Barrios (2006), Jover, Fleta and González (2016) and Rubio and Martínez-Lirola (2013).

The third objective addresses the desired linguistic competence for a primary-school English teacher. The results show that a high percentage (59.5%) consider a B2 level enough, whereas only 35.1% express that it should be a C1. This difference in perception is an important issue to discuss.

On the one hand, the Comprehensive Programme on Foreign Language Learning 2010/2020 (Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports, 2011) establishes C1 as the level required to teach English. On the other hand, schools' requirements focus on teachers' linguistic competence, meaning a good communicative command of the language combined with a broad knowledge of vocabulary and grammar that will help teachers successfully instruct the specific contents that are covered in subjects such as Science. Participants may either not be aware of or concerned about this governmental policy and the requirements of bilingual schools because 59.5% declare to be a desired level of English is a B2 level.

Another aspect concerns the relevant data that reveal the informants' perception towards the English language. Both Kruskal-Wallis and U Mann-Whitney, in statements such as "I like English" 22%, "I am good at English"

20.33%, “I like teaching English” 20.52%, reveal the participants’ interest in English. These data show that students have chosen this degree because they have a clear interest in the language and the teaching profession. Teaching has always been considered a vocational profession and the data obtained in this research confirm the importance of this aspect.

In spite of their interest in English, an essential tool in students’ chosen profession, their linguistic competence is not what it is required or expected by the bilingual school system. This is another feature that indicates that informants are not worried about the role their language competence has in deciding their professional development and teaching experience. There is no doubt that a high language competence characterises qualified teachers since this factor allows them to teach effectively. Needless to say, effective instruction is an essential part of training children who will become future citizens (Pan & Say, 2017).

Participants also consider that English has some difficult aspects to acquire, such as pronunciation (37.8%), grammar (21.6%), and written expression (10.8%). Particularly for a teacher, pronunciation is an essential aspect to master. Clear reasons underlie the difficulty Spanish speakers have in acquiring correct pronunciation. Lázaro (2007), a researcher in the field of teaching literacy in English, briefly explains several differences between both languages that make the acquisition of the oral skills difficult, especially pronunciation. According to Lázaro’s explanation, English has 26 letters and 44 phonemes as opposed to Spanish, which only has 24 letters and phonemes. In addition, letters and phonemes in Spanish have a direct relationship, whereas in English there is no such relation, and the pronunciation of the English language presents many irregularities. These aspects make the learning and teaching of this L2 at early ages a difficult task, an aspect that teachers should consider at initial stages.

It is a well-known fact that young learners possess favourable characteristics when learning a foreign language, especially in the area of acquiring oral skills. Teachers’ speech will be a model to learn from. For this reason, it is important that teachers offer good examples of English. The more and better teachers speak in class, the more and better children will learn the language. Pronunciation plays an important role because teachers use the L2 in every classroom interaction. By doing so, children will learn the language both consciously and unconsciously.

University education programmes should offer subjects that cover all aspects of the language, without neglecting the importance of oral skills, especially pronunciation. As Vold (2017) states, the weakness of university programmes in training preservice teachers’ oral skills results in a lack of confidence in communication. This lack of confidence will have an impact on future teachers’ effectiveness in the classroom. This lack of effectiveness will in turn impact the teachers’ beliefs in their own self-efficacy. As Chacón (2006) states, those teachers who feel less confident in the use of the L2,

will have a low self-efficacy, whereas those who feel competent in their oral interactions will have a high self-efficacy. It is obvious that a direct link connects self-efficacy and competence in language usage.

As regards the statement “I would like to work abroad”, important data related to students interests in their future employment were revealed. The percentage of participants who gave a positive answer to this statement (18.88%) is higher than those who respond negatively (11.95%). This result can be connected to the participants’ concern for their lack of oral fluency in English. They know that this teaching degree may provide foreign work opportunities that will help them improve both their oral competence and their teaching skills.

Once more, students are aware of the importance of English in the labour market. They know that the better their English competence is, the easier it will be for them to find a job. It is clear that Spanish schools require teachers with a high linguistic competence and advanced teaching competences that will firstly allow these teachers to teach English as a medium of instruction and, secondly, to teach the content required at the primary-school level.

This study is distinctive in that it examines the profile of students who attended the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track throughout three consecutive years. Previous studies that have analysed students’ profiles have been cross-sectional. Although the results are an important contribution to the field of language teaching and education, given the reduced sample size, some precaution is required in interpretation.

Yet the results also underscore the lack of attention new degree programmes in Primary Education give to the linguistic preparation of preservice teachers. Secondly, the data emphasise the students’ concern regarding their linguistic preparation. Thirdly, this investigation shows the great interest these students have in their studies, regardless their level of English. Finally, this research also reveals data that are becoming more relevant in the last year: younger generations’ interest in acquiring living experiences abroad. The studies of the Degree of Primary Education, Foreign Language Track provide a framework that helps these preservice teachers obtain a position abroad that will allow them to improve their linguistic competence while gaining experience that will develop their teaching competence.

Finally, the limitations of this study must also be mentioned. As was stated, the sample is not a large quantity, given that the number of students who enrol in this specialty track only constitute 6–7% of the total number of students pursuing a degree in Primary Education.

Given that the results obtained for variables such as age, sex or academic year have not given important statistical differences, we encourage other researchers to carry out similar investigations. In summary, we feel that the linguistic profile of students of the Degree in Primary Education, Foreign Language track demands further investigation. In particular, the linguistic

preparation of these groups of preservice teachers requires special attention and should be studied following different paradigms, approaches, and research methodologies in education.

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