

D13: AlphaEU State of the Art Report

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30/04/2013

Project Title: Alphabets of Europe
Project Acronym: AlphaEU
Project Number: 531092-LLP-1-2012-1-CY-KA2-KA2MP



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



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Introduction

The objective of WP5 is a state-of the art meta-research report on the use of alphabet books and related activities in pre-primary education (both mother tongue education and foreign language awareness raising) in the ALPHA-EU partner countries.

This report is expected to combine five national reports that review the foreign language policies and practices for introducing foreign languages in pre-primary education in each country; to set guidelines for using alphabet books and alphabet-related activities in pre-school in mother tongue education that might be transferrable to foreign language contexts; and to define a rationale (general approach and philosophy) on using digital alphabet books and activities to raise awareness to foreign languages at pre-school level.

In order to review these aspects, each partner produced a national report based on agreed guidelines (a series of questions) to be shared among all ALPHA-EU partners by the end of March 2013. After a period of comments on a first joint draft of the final international report, the latter should be ready by the 30th April 2013 and serve as the basis for the ALPHA-EU project partners to design materials and pedagogical approaches.

This time frame was not strictly adhered to for there were delays in sharing the full national reports.

The parts that constitute the final report are the following:

1. Foreign language policies and practices for introducing foreign languages in pre-primary education in each country;
2. Guidelines for using alphabet books and alphabet-related activities in pre-school in mother tongue education that might be transferrable to foreign language contexts;
3. A rationale (general approach and philosophy) on using digital alphabet books and activities to raise awareness to foreign languages at pre-school level.

Foreign language policies and practices for introducing foreign languages in pre-primary education in each country

Provision

Pre-primary education provision may be organized by the central government (Cyprus, Ireland Italy, Portugal, and Romania,) or regional government (Austria). Further differences reside in that national/regional cultures may give preference to care by the family (Austria) or institutional care when it comes to infants and toddlers. Child-minding services for children up to 3 years old may include a variety of situations: being minded by own parents who stay at home, child-minders, crèches, playgroups, nannies, day-centers. They may be supervised by the state or even include a curriculum (such as in Romania).

Kindergartens in all partner countries are overseen by central state authorities and staffed with trained and qualified personnel (educators, teachers, pedagogues), although requirements for qualification may differ in each partner country. Kindergartens and pre-school education may precede primary education or be part of it, as in Ireland, where children from the age of 4 may be enrolled in the infant classes in primary education.

Generally speaking, though not compulsory in every partner country, kindergartens and pre-school facilities are open for **children from 3/4 to 5/6 years-old** and are expected to provide supervised, structured, and high-quality care for children. In some of the partner countries, such as Portugal and Ireland, pre-school education is seen as complementing family education, when targeted at disadvantaged communities. In these cases the educational programme, as described in the report for Ireland, enhances the overall development of the child, helps prevent school failure and offsets the effects of social disadvantage.

Generally speaking all country reports highlight the critical role of play, relationships and language for young children's learning. Some (like the Irish and Austrian reports), put a stronger emphasis on partnerships with parents.

Pre-school or kindergarten may further be divided into two stages or three stages: the first level from 3 to 5 years old and the second level from 5 to 6 years old, which is generally seen as preparing for entry into primary school; and the 3-year-olds, the 4-year-olds and the 5-year-olds groups, each with their own needs.

Early foreign language learning at pre-school stages

On the whole, in all partner countries **parents** seem to value early foreign language learning, although state guidelines do not (yet) include early foreign language learning in pre-school curricula or activities.

Private kindergartens and pre-school education facilities seem to be more open to the foreign linguistic skills of early learners than state regulated facilities, which generally do not include early foreign language learning provision. When there are classes for early foreign language learning in both contexts, English seems to be the main linguistic choice, followed by German, French, and eventually Spanish (in Ireland) and local minority languages (such as Burgenland-Croatian, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Slovenian, Slovakian and Romanian and others in Austria). There may be bilingual education classes in certain contexts. For example, in Cyprus, Greek may be a second language. Romania seems to be the partner country with the widest choice of languages for early foreign language learning, which includes also Spanish, Russian and Italian. Ireland seems to be the country where the learning of a foreign language at pre-school stages seems to be less valued.

As stated in the Irish report, 'a lot of work needs to go into promoting the benefits of early foreign language learning for children's development' especially among parents. Strategies should perhaps also be found to encourage the learning of 'minority' languages in Europe (in the sense of not being widely used as foreign languages), such as Greek, Romanian and Portuguese.

On the whole early foreign language learning in kindergartens and pre-school is taught by either native speakers with some kind of educational qualification or by foreign language teachers in their first years of practice or experienced.

The length of classes at this level may vary from 15 to 30 minutes once or twice a week, in Romania, to 50 minutes and one hour in other partner countries.

The aim and objectives of early foreign language learning seem to be, in general, language awareness and promoting openness to different cultures or intercultural competence. In general, this learning focuses on the following **linguistic** aspects:

- ✓ Phonemic awareness
- ✓ Basic familiar topics: the weather, the family, fruits, numbers, vegetables

- ✓ Basic sentence production for communication (*What's your name? How old are you? Do you have any pets?*)
- ✓ Learn by doing or practice active learning (i.e. learning that is child-centered and combine songs, games and rhymes with real situations).

Intercultural aspects included in this approach highlight the following:

- ✓ the possibility to raise curiosity for the other, his language and culture;
- ✓ to compare and contrast in order to find commonalities between languages (translation and interpretation are part of this);
- ✓ to train the metalinguistic ability to reflect on how one thinks in a language.

Other highlighted features are the respect for the learners' rhythm of learning and the notion that comprehension comes before production and oral competence precedes the written one. Importance is ascribed to stimulating the interest of the children, and creating conditions in order to stimulate communication.

Grammar is not taught explicitly and written words are introduced mainly for recognition purposes.

From the point of view of foreign language providers (companies and individuals) a foreign language offered at a pre-primary level needs to be simple, active and entertaining. Choice of words as well as numbers should be adapted to the age of a child/group and those should be repeated as often as possible in different contexts in order to enable children to connect and expand meanings on their own. Music and movements should also be integrated into the teaching unit in order to maintain the interest of a child.

A tentative curriculum might include, as suggested by Silva: names and saying hello, colors, farm animals, jungle animals, numbers, feelings, body parts, family and folk tales. Vocabulary would consist of, for example,

- Hello, How are you?
- I'm fine, thank you; I'm happy; I'm sad; I'm angry; I'm sleepy...
- Red, yellow, pink, green, purple, orange, blue, white, brown, black
- Bear, bird, duck, horse, frog, cat, dog, sheep, goldfish, mother, children
- Mother, father, baby
- Elephant, lion, giraffe, monkey, snake, camel
- Spider, water, rain, sun

There are also suggestions for using particular picturebooks in the English classroom, namely:

- *I spy* (Susan Beasley)
- *The princess song*
- *Brown Bear, Brown Bear what do you see?* (Eric Carle)
- *Dear Zoo* (Rod Campbel)
- *Little Red Riding Hood*
- *Goldilocks and the three bears*

As to methods, S. Mourão ¹ recommends the EEE Model: Encounter/Engage/Exploit Language as the appropriate methodology for ELL. When children ENCOUNTER the L2 for the first time, they listen and show comprehension by physically reacting to the words. Children then begin to ENGAGE in the L2 by using it with the teacher's support. They continue to react physically, but also respond verbally to a greater extent: repeating, chanting, and occasionally participating with spontaneous verbal responses. From here the children begin to EXPLOIT the L2 by using it independently. Exploiting what they know to communicate effectively. They use L2 in context to play games, listen to and interact with stories, and participate in activities.

Balboni (2002) highlights stages in approaching any learning unit:

- ✓ Motivation phase: to create the motivation towards the language and the activity proposed;
- ✓ Approaching: in this phase the children are guided for a first general contact with the activity (preferring techniques related to the use of senses and mainly to the practice)
- ✓ Focusing: the teacher can promote activities for the memorization of some linguistic structures he can select:
- ✓ Re-use: also this phase is for memorization, but in this case the children test the language by playing such activity as dramatization, game, songs, role-plays, role-making and so on.

Successful experiments in early foreign language learning

Successful **experiments** described in the national partner reports include franchised methods of teaching and learning, such as:

¹ Sandie Mourão and Gamboa. 2009. *Best Buddies Teacher's Edition 1*. Mexico: Ed. Macmillan Mexico. Coelho D., Mourão, S. 2009. *Little Hoola Teacher's Guide*. Porto: Porto Editora.

- ✓ Fast Track Kids – Discovery (an interactive program for learning English which combines digital resources and practical activities),
- ✓ the Helen Doran learning English programmes based on the child’s “natural ability to absorb spoken language through repetitive hearing and positive reinforcement,
- ✓ the *Aventurile lui Hocus si Lotus* (in Romania) or Hocus&Lotus’ cartoons (in Italy), which applies psycholinguistic elements in teaching foreign languages to small children – affection, frequent repetition, new and appealing experiences, narration, role-playing. The foreign language is learned through the creation of a context in which teachers and children speak, live and act exclusively in the new language: this is the fantastic world of Hocus & Lotus. The two little dinocrocs, (half dinosaurs, half crocodiles) with their dinosaur tail and their single crocodile tooth, experience fantastic and exciting adventures alongside the children. With Hocus & Lotus the children engage in a variety of activities characterized by affection and emotional involvement and structured in such a way that they respect the rhythm, time and skills of each and every one of them, by going through the different stages of native language acquisition process.
- ✓ LESI - Lingue Europee nella Scuola dell’Infanzia: The approach is spontaneous and with the use of the English language for any communication activity. Children use the foreign language when playing, when having lunch and while carrying out other routine activities foreseen by the curriculum thanks to the integration and collaboration between mother tongue teachers and teachers of the school. In this way the language is not proposed as a series of words to memorize out of context, but in all communicative situations.
- ✓ Follador Nursey school in Italy is an approach to early childhood education is based on the concept that through play children start to develop physically, mentally and socially. The programme’s focus is on the children and their growing independence, social awareness, sensory exploration, development of physical skills and language. Through organized play and free play in a caring environment children develop self-esteem and social competence by being encouraged to help themselves, take initiative and become increasingly independent.
- ✓ The Kinder Garden is an English-immersion Canadian Pre-School for children aged 1 to 6 years, founded especially for parents who wish to offer English play

and experiences to their children. Since opening its doors in 2004, the school has built an outstanding reputation for the quality of childcare and education. They offer Early Years programming based on the English National Curriculum. The Kinder Garden staff implement a developmentally appropriate curriculum that nurtures and supports the unique potential of each child. Teachers do not follow preconceived conventions. Instead, they closely observe and respond appropriately to each child's needs and interests. Careful observations of the children help the teachers acquire meaningful responses and to collect useful data which will guide them in making curricular decisions based on the children's interests, talents, and levels of development.

- ✓ Kid's Cot is a nursery school where English is spoken exclusively. The school provides for children who are 6 months to 6 years of age and is the ideal environment for children to learn English naturally by living the experience
- ✓ Barchetta Blu Association - All games proposed are the vehicle through which the language is transmitted and are structured according to criteria that allow children to reach high levels of competence. Through games and interaction a natural and spontaneous process of acquisition is induced. Activities aim at stimulating the various intelligences in children, not only the linguistic intelligence, but also the visual, interpersonal, musical and so on, in a more ample perspective according to the principles of Multiple Intelligences of Howard Gardner, since every child has many ways to learn.
- ✓ English for Children an interactive program for children between 4-10 years of age. Children learn English through games, songs and activities. <http://www.englishforchildren.com/>
- ✓ **Kidsco** (The Kids English Company). It is a semi mobile language company. They hold classes in small Hort or Kindergarten groups as well as in their own centre. <http://www.kidsco.at/about.htm>
- ✓ **Kikus** focuses on children between 3-10 years of age. An adapted program for early and pre-primary German and English acquisition. <http://www.hueber.de/kikus/>
- ✓ The **Vienna English Preschool (VEP)** was founded in 2004 from an established kindergarten which has been educating young children for over ten years. The VEP is a private English speaking care facility for children of ages 1 1/2 - 6. <http://www.viennaenglishpreschool.com/>

Successful experiments also include resources such as class books, namely Vanessa Reilly and Sheila M. Ward's *Very Young Learners* (Oxford University Press, 1997, 2003), which offers an integrated approach to ELL with pre-primary routines, songs and chants and arts and crafts activities and *Little Hoola* and *Zappy* (Porto Editora).

The Cypriot report highlights that most successful experiments in public and private kindergartens use a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Languages) approach, such as learning music or math or history through a foreign language through allotting time to this particular approach to learning throughout the children's school routines. Successful implementation of the CLIL approach to early foreign language learning is done through:

1. CLIL showers: 20-30 minutes, 2-3 times per week, children continue to explore the thematic unit of the week (e.g. fruit, books, or seasons) through activities in a foreign language (e.g. songs, games, stories, crafts, etc.)

2. Modular Model: Entire units in a specific subject area (e.g. Science or Physical Education) are taught with the use of the foreign language.

The Cypriot report highlights that there is a lack of appropriate and relevant CLIL material and this might be a focus for the ALPHAEU project." AlphaEU could provide such material, as themed digital alphabet books and accompanying activities could be easily used either within CLIL showers or the Modular Model."

Best practice in early foreign language learning and teaching

Successful experiments presented allow for extraction of best practice in early foreign language learning at pre-primary level include a limited vocabulary, a lot of repetition, an almost Exclusive focus on oral tasks and communication, reinforcing intonation; the use of child-centred situations and interests, and the inclusion of intercultural references through comparison and exploration.

The following are examples of best practice mentioned by the several national reports:

➤ **Asking for something**, e.g.

- 'I want to see..', 'I want...' and so on.
- Where is Tom, the cat?" a game developed around the cartoon character "Tom & Jerry", who hides in different parts of the classroom –

the children have to find Tom by asking questions and using different prepositions: in, on, down, up, etc.

- “What colour is...?” – digital games in which children have to follow different instructions: paint, recognize colours, listen to the pronunciation, repeat, etc.

➤ **Actions** during which children have to move quickly according to the command they hear (jump, sit, crawl, fall, run, clap)

- it can be connected to colours, shapes with use of prepositions (sit on the red cushion/circle, jump over the colour etc.)
- Hello, my name is...” and expressing commands and instructions: “Stand up!”, “Sit down!”, “Come here!” – each child greets, says his/her name and follows the instructions given in English;
- thematic activities like ‘daily routines’ when children express daily activities in English as they perform different actions: going to the bathroom, washing, eating etc
- use and make ‘nameplates and finger puppets with the children;

➤ **Games**

- Please Game different version of ‘Simon says’; instead of ‘Simon says’ simply ‘please’ suffices.
- Flashcard games: showing flashcards with words and pictures at first, later on a game of memory can be introduced as well as pairing up or association game.
- Learning body parts in English through movement;
- I went to the market’. It trains memory, uses the past tense and the determiners *some*, *a* and *an*. The educator needs a bag in which put all the items: *I went to the market and I bought a potato; I went to the market and I bought a potato and some milk...*’
- pass the ball’ (if the child gets the ball s/he has to say: ‘Hello, what’s your name?’);

➤ **Songs and rhymes**

- Songs are used to introduce new concepts/vocabulary, to socialize and highlight routines, as well as to mark transition moments. Eg. ‘This is the time we wash our hands, we wash our hands, we wash our hands;

this is the way we wash our hands, we wash our hands every time in the morning.”

➤ **Using the narrative format**

- Listening to stories and simultaneously looking at pictures;
- use role-play to retell a story.
- tell stories;

➤ **Expressive arts**

- combine English with expressive arts;

Other examples of best practice mentioned include encouraging interaction; speaking exclusively in the target language, during the English class and after, even with parents; inviting native language speakers to the class; or organizing end of year performances which also include a foreign language show prepared by the respective foreign language teacher; creating an English corner in the classroom, create routines in English, create an English animal friend;

Points that could further be used for ALPHA-EU exploration

1. Generally there are no set curricular guidelines for early foreign language learning and teachers have to devise their own curricula and materials. ALPHA-EU could use this gap as an opportunity.
2. In some of the partner countries parents are not included as partners in the early foreign language learning process, so this could constitute another opportunity for ALPHA-EU to think up and design materials that address parents' role in early foreign language learning as supporters of their children's learning.

Guidelines for using alphabet books and alphabet-related activities in pre-school in mother tongue education that might be transferrable to foreign language contexts

Introduction of letters and alphabets

Pre-primary education in the several national contexts and in its several stages may be related or not to pre-reading activities , although all reports concur in that they should create a print rich and language rich environment. Alphabets and letters are introduced at pre-primary level not as a content for children to learn explicitly, but essentially as part of awareness raising activities to reading and writing. Not all letters of the alphabet are included, for instance, in Austria (in German).

It seems common for 5 year olds in all partner countries to interact with the formal written code in order to recognize graphic conventions and to practice fine motor skills in drawing letters (hand-eye coordination, orientation in space, sense of direction). In Portugal, however, this approach is constructivist, based on Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories. The aim is to integrate, coordinate, implement and mobilize different kinds of knowledge. In Ireland, learning English (mother tongue) is based on the 'Jolly Phonics' multisensory approach which stresses the learning of some of the 42 letter sounds. As stated in the report, 'children are not introduced to the alphabet until they have first learned all the phonics'.

Some of the most commonly used resources for teaching letters and the alphabet are flashcards, books, activity books, special exercise books (with pictures, words in big and/or small capital letters, letter-writing models), audio materials and applications (on phones, computers and tablets). Mention is also made to **illustrated alphabets** where every letter is accompanied by the picture of an object the name of which begins with the respective sound; and to "the calendar of nature": the season pattern is stuck on the locomotive, and the patterns with the name of the day, the date, and the weather forecast are stuck on the seven carriages/wagons; there is also use of magnetic letters and **the speaking-alphabet book**, an educational software that uses children's voices.

Some national reports include **alphabet picture books**, which help children trace lines and shapes in an entertaining way and even connect letters into words or

syllables. Letters are often associated with animals and objects. Examples: *“Precalcolo / prelettura e prescrittura” con Cuki e Cocò* (Raffaello Editrice); *Chiocciolina Precalcolo - Prelettura – Prescrittura* (ed. Tresei scuola); *Cuori di panna* (Mirò Editori) in Italy.

Thus, some of the alphabet related activities that might be transferred to early foreign language learning fall into the following categories:

✓ **to play with writing (associate sound and grapheme)**

- recognize common words (with article in German);
- know how to isolate a letter;
- understand where a word starts and ends;
- understand the connection between an object and its name written on a label
- “label” (using isolated letters, well-known words, dots, circles, stars, etc.) different objects or “write” letters, advertisements, etc
- know some letters (eg. those of own name);
- know how to use writing tools such as pens and pencils;
- know how to write own name;
- write some capital and small letters;
- understand contexts of writing;
- separate numbers from letters;
- play motion games that involve the whole body, finger extension games, the grasping of small objects, cutting and tearing paper, using different colours, hand movements games with pre-writing exercises;
- draw the outline of letters, coloring them, developing the capacity to reproduce the graphic sign;
- lacing cards. Children sew through the holes the letter-forms and other outlines;
- do jigsaw puzzles: Mixed pieces (each piece has a capital or small-case letter – players match a capital letter with the correct small-case letter, e.g. A-a, B-b, C-c, D-d, E-e... or Six-piece puzzles (square pieces) for each letter
- drag the arrow or trace their fingers along guiding lines to write the letters (e.g. “Tracing ABC” example on tablets). Result is evaluated,

the letter sound is heard, a flash card with relevant image-word appears.

- use bilingual flash cards
 - identify the odd letter/word (identify the one letter or word that comes from a different language)
 - group words/letters in different language-baskets (e.g. separate mixed English and Greek words)
 - “build letters” using objects that begin with that letter (e.g. books to build “B”)
 - play bingo (cover images with words or letters from which the illustrated words begin – bilingual game with words from two different languages)
 - make letter books
 - make letter cubes
- ✓ **to listen attentively and with pleasure to stories and other texts, to be able to extract main ideas, to comment, and to raise questions;**
- pick up a book correctly; direction, covers and content, etc.
 - understand meaning in words and pictures;
 - predict events from pictures;
 - put parts of short stories in the right chronological order, or choose the preferred ending for stories;
 - act out stories;
 - recall own experiences.
 - play multilingual memory games with letters and words (e.g. mixed pairs of words in different languages)
- ✓ **To learn about the alphabet in meaningful ways through play**
- Pretend;
 - Drama;
 - Make-believe;
 - Role play;
 - Fantasy play.
- ✓ **To relate activities to everyday tasks related to literacy and numeracy**
- make lists of menus;
 - Pay for cinema tasks;

- Play with mobile phones, keyboards, cameras and calculators.
- ✓ **To develop phonological awareness of the child through phonological games**
 - pronounce common words correctly;
 - produce rhymes and alliteration;
 - divide words in syllables;
 - build words from syllables;
 - use phonemes to build syllables;
 - identify words that start and end with the same syllable;
 - add or subtract syllables to words;
 - recognize and count words in sentences;
 - support a short dialogue;
 - make up own rhymes;
 - identify the letter corresponding to the sound they hear

Effective approaches in using alphabet books

The most effective approaches in using alphabet books seem to be activities which focus on 'discovering writing' and on associating this discovery with meaning. Children are put in the position of being producers of writing and not only users and reproducers of writing.

To be effective, activities should create a child-centered visual vocabulary that associates letters to objects and particular situations. They should mobilize different written language functions to solve real life situations and play situations. They should enable children to distinguish the written code from other codes (e.g. iconic) and to use it adequately in context. They should play with writing. They should lead children into noticing writing all around and seek to attribute meaning to it. They should enable children to recognize own names and familiar objects' names. They should invite children to listen attentively and with pleasure to stories and other texts, extract main ideas, comment and raise questions.

Among the suggestions made by the national reports are the following activities:

To play with writing (associate sound and grapheme)

- ✓ We all have names. Tell a story and explore the names of characters. Tell children 'We all have names. What's your name and which letters do you write it with?' Children receive tags with their names. They assemble their name from what they see on the tag. They put up their names on the wall (collective work).
- ✓ Food and letters. On the table children play with letter noodles to assemble own name and write the word 'canja' (noodle soup in Portuguese). They learn how to cook noodle soup. They copy noodle soup recipe. They drink soup at lunch. Educator reinforces what the letters look like before and after cooking.
- ✓ Mother's Day and use the book of important dates are activities that require the cooperation of the family. Children bring from home the mother's name written by the mother herself (on the other side, the educator writes the child's name). On the wall, the children collectively assemble the following information: "The mother's name starts with ...' After some time, the educator writes with the child the mother's name on the computer. They compare both writings and they are put side by side on the wall.
- ✓ Calling the register. The educator has name tags for the children. These name tags are used to call the register and issue instructions on activities. Eg. The Fish Song: 'If I were this girl (show name tag) and knew how to swim I would ask the cook (Manuela) to have lunch...tra la la'. This is a strategy that could be used to call the register.
- ✓ Puzzle. Name cards related to a particular theme/ content/ project cut out in puzzle form. Children have to put the letters together to assemble the word.
- ✓ Lotto-type games. Children have to say the name of the object and then to find the correct label/word pattern.
- ✓ Letter-colouring. Children are asked to colour the inside part of the letter.
- ✓ Matching exercises. Children have to find the corresponding letter-sign and draw it according to the model;
- ✓ Writing in sand. Children use their fingers to draw lines and letters in sand/salt/maize flour;
- ✓ Letter -"manufacturing". Children are encouraged to make their own letters using the scissors, a ruler, and a pencil

- ✓ Letter - touching (sensing). Children use their fingers to follow/stroke the route of the letters

Mention is also made to useful alphabet-related resources, such as:

- ✓ Object tags. Tables and chairs have tags with the children's names, which have been written by the educator together with the child in the child's favourite colour. The child recognizes and identifies own name and thereby will locate her chair/table, first with the teacher's help and then progressively in a more autonomous way. It is expected that the child will be able to identify the colleagues' objects.
- ✓ Wooden cards with different images and the object's name written in capital letters (big or small) below or close to the image – children have to choose the correct letter-form and fill in the appropriate letter-outline;
- ✓ Flash cards which contain the capital letter (big and small), and an image, the name of which begins with the respective letter, and some rhyme verses or a riddle;
- ✓ Letter- stickers - the letter image is associated with the first sound of a word representing it, and then they are stuck together;
- ✓ Puzzle-type online games – some letters are coming up one by one, and the player has to press the similar letter on the computer keyboard in due time;
- ✓ Wooden cubes with letters and images – each cube has a capital letter on it, a number, and a picture; letter-image correspondence is easily comprehended;
- ✓ Games with phonemes, syllables and words. Let's play....Group the pictures starting with the same phoneme; Look and read the initial phonemes and match them with the pictures
- ✓ FIRST STEPS TO READING AND WRITING...Let's play: Match the pictures with the corresponding words. Let's play dominos. The final syllable of the first word becomes the initial syllable of the following word. Let's play with the alphabet. Trace on the floor Giant letters. Fix the Starting point and the kids go over them by walking, jumping, crawling in order to trace their shape.
- ✓ Cut out of a magazine the chosen letter; Then stick the letter cuttings inside the giant letter drawn by the teacher on piece a paper;
- ✓ Use salt dough to make alphabet letters and play creating words or writing the child's name;



To listen attentively and with pleasure to stories and other texts, to be able to extract main ideas, to comment, and to raise questions.

- ✓ Reading rhymes. The educator reads out a rhyme which is written on the wall. The educator shows and follows each word as it is read out. The children repeat the words. The educator explains that she has written the words in order not to forget. She explains that words are 'made of' letters. The children paint: The letter that wanted to be painted. Each child colours in a letter (letters will be thicker for 4-year-olds and thinner for 5-year-olds).
- ✓ Walnuts and Os. When children arrive in the classroom they see a bag full of walnuts on the table. A child says 'Walnuts look like Os'. The educator uses the prompt to explore the Letter Chart and the story of 'The Wizard of Oz'. Children look for Os in one page of the book.

To develop phonological awareness of the child through phonological games

- ✓ Singing the alphabet. Children listen to the song Alphabet on Panda channel.
- ✓ Rhyming verse. Children practice the pronunciation while memorizing short rhymed verses about letters and about different words starting with those letters
- ✓ Letter - related songs. Children play various songs about letter-writing and pronunciation
- ✓ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2S3E45llvw>. Children repeat parts of the song and suggest more things started by each letter.
- ✓ In the gym. Each child has a letter on a string around the neck and presumes to be either A or G or B... On the floor there are circles/houses of letters. The children run freely around the gym. On the clapping of hands, followed by the instruction: 'A go home', all the 'As' have to go to the 'A' circle/house. This is repeated for all letters.
- ✓ Phonologic awareness raising games / based on letter sounds and syllable sounds. The clock game: the child points to objects started by the same letter or the same 'bit' (syllable).
Image lotto – lotto cards are attached by the same 'bit' sounds.
Clap hands for each syllable.

Say names divided in 'little bits' (syllables).

Language games: 'If I take away 'di' from 'Diana' you get a new girl's name. Which? 'Ana'.

- ✓ Nursery rhymes about body parts, which allow children to find out more about their bodies by pointing and touching parts of their body; or their school mates act out the rhyme; by drawing and substituting words with drawings. Eg.

Filastrocca tocca tocca,

Tocca la testa, tocca la bocca

Tocca il naso, tocca l'occhio

Tocca la gamba tocca

- ✓ Riddles: Riddles are useful for repetition and memorization. Children have to find the solution through rhyming words.

Do la caccia al topolino

ho un bel pelo morbidino

occhi verdi lunghi baffi, se mi arrabbio sono graffi!

(CAT)

- ✓ Lullabies. The lullaby is sung through miming and substituting some words with images.
- ✓ Tongue twisters. Repeating slowly, many times or quickly or progressively faster, modifying, or reinventing or drawing the items of a rhyme.
- ✓ Giacomo the puppet: Giacomino speaks like this: Hello I'm Giacomino and I can only say Pani-no, Treni-no, Cioccolati-no, Paperi-no! Why is it so?-Leave the kids some time to think about it. Then the puppet presents his friend Gialla. Hello, I am Gialla and I can only say Pal-la,caval-la, Stal-la, Farfal-la! Why do I speak like this? The game goes on till the children understand the aim of the game.
- ✓ Knock-Knock, Who's there? Kids are in a semi-circle, the teacher gives each a card with an image and prepares at the center a circle representing a castle. Kids in turn say the object on the card, if it rhymes with "castello" they stand up and go inside the castle-ring. Es. castello, mantello, ombrello, martello.....can all get inside the circle!!

- ✓ Syllable segmentation. By showing an object or a picture the child breaks down the word into syllables and a school mate or the teacher gives him the picture. By tapping or jumping to count the number of syllables in a word.
- ✓ Divide picture cards in two/three boxes according to their length (two, three or four syllable words with stress on the second to last syllable. Let's play again.....Action games. Moving freely around. When given the cue the children jump for as many times as the syllables in the words CANE.....CAROTA....GIRASOLE. Everyone stops when the teacher says the word CANE. Divide the children into two groups:CA-NE, when the syllable CA is mentioned the group CA stops, when the syllable NE is said, group NE stops.
- ✓ Syllable Fusion. Robot game: the teacher says a word in pieces and the kids have to guess the word pronounced Eg. "If I say ge-la-to, which word did I say"? Recognizing the opening syllable common to other words; Recognizing in different words the identical final syllable; Showing the child objects and/or cards: "Give me the card with the word ending with...NA. And then again: Choose the cards ending in the same way.
- ✓ Vowel sounds in the gym.. A E I O U. Read the rhyme and the children shape Their body to the corresponding sound. *il ginocchio.....*

A rationale (general approach and philosophy) on using digital alphabet books and activities to raise awareness to foreign languages at pre-school level.

Features of alphabet picture books, on line resources and activities

The fact that digital resources are already being used in the mother tongue may encourage their use for early foreign language learning. A collection of recommended picture books, on line resources and activities highlights some features that may be useful for designing alphabet-related materials, which are described below.

The context: books

Recommended picture books present children with letters seen in everyday things and beings, such as attractive, colorful pictures of animals, objects, food, elements of nature. They generally feature a different letter with an appropriate animal (for example) on each page.

These picture books playfully invite children to develop their vocabulary associated to own interests while simultaneously getting acquainted with the form/design of letters. They may follow a particular theme, such as animals, and include rhymes.

Some of these picture books also tell the story of quest for the constitutive parts of a letter that may be found in other letters; they include songs, besides pictures and verbal texts.

A central character is present as an organizer of the teaching/learning process.

Examples:

- ✓ “I Spy” digital alphabet book: Each page/screen contains a large number of objects starting with the “page-letter” in various languages (e.g. a messy children’s room, full of furniture, toys, stuffed toys, posters, clothing, etc.). Users choose language and tap or click on the objects/animals/people whose name begins with the page letter.
 - if correct, the object is highlighted/animated, player wins a star, the word appears with the first letter in different colour, the sound of the word is heard

- If incorrect, the object is momentarily highlighted in a different colour (perhaps red) and player loses half a star.

- ✓ Multilingual alphabet books: each page refers to two letters that are similar (in sound, shape, or alphabet order) in two languages (e.g. for English & Greek: A / Α, C / Γ, F / Φ) and two words that begin with these letters and have the same meaning. The user tries to sound the letters and the words and checks her/his performance by clicking on and listening to them. The order of the letters changes depending on the user's first language (if the user is a native Greek speaker, then we click on "Greek letter order", etc.)

e.g. English-Greek (English native speaker)

A / Α – Airplane / Αεροπλάνο

B / Β – Book / Βιβλίο

C / Γ – Cat / Γάτα

D / Δ – Dinosaur / Δεινόσαυρος

E / Ε – Elephant / Ελέφαντας

F / Φ – Food / Φαγητό

G / Γ – Gorilla / Γορίλας

H / Η – Hero / Ήρωας

I / Ι – Iguana / Ιγκουάνα

J / - - - Jewel / - - - -

K / Κ – Kangaroo / Καγκουρό

L / Λ – Lemon / Λεμόνι

M / Μ – Mom / Μαμά

- ✓ The "Alpha book"

(http://students.english.ilstu.edu/ppanao/alphabook/cover_page.htm)

The entire book is devoted to "Alpha" – words that begin with "A" in all participating languages (some words could be grouped together if they sound similar and/or have the same meaning; e.g. Astronaut / Αστροναύτης, Airplane / Αεροπλάνο, etc.)

- ✓ Thematic alphabet books based on units/projects that are relevant in partners' pre-school curricula (e.g. "The Winter Alphabet Book", "The Alphabet Book of Professions", "The Vehicles Alphabet", "The Family Alphabet", Trees and Fruits, etc.)

- ✓ "The Alphabet Book of Names" (names from different cultures/languages).

The letters

Some of these picture books show the letters of the alphabet as having organic, changeable forms that represent the transition between abstract symbol (letter) and animal/object/element of nature.

There is also a presentation of letters in small caps, capital letters, printed and handwritten.

Phonological awareness

Some of these texts reinforce the phonologic sound of the letter and offers small memorable lines about the picture. Eg. 'Bata as belas asas borboleta!'

The context: games

Word and picture match card games such as memory seem to present an almost unlimited variety and combination of colours, graphics, themes, and focal points, which are regarded as simple and effective to apply.

The "domino" games are also very easily made (even as an online version) and offer a wide range of options e.g. a letter is on the one half of the domino and a picture with an animal or object beginning with that letter is on the other side. Some dominos will only have objects/animals, some only letters, and can include various themes such as pets, zoo animals, house objects etc.

The contexts: digital resources

The e-book seems to be available to may pre-school educators and parents;

Some internet websites are used by teachers particularly when they are supplementary to other materials already used in class or related to some television cartoon or series;

Web educational resources such as TurtleDiary are mentioned as examples of much used online learning resources;

There is also mention to technologies that may be used in class or by parents and these include: the new smart-phone and tablet technology, the 'blackboard', 'magnetic' and 'whizzy';

I-pads/tablets may be used to flash pictures and words in the classroom;

Online games and tasks available for children available at different language centers (such as the Helen Doron).

Interactivity (for on line books/resources)

Interactive activities (activities coordinated by the central) are challenging: “This is right, keep doing it!”/ “Try again!”...

Letter-writing section (“This is the way we write an A...”) with voice directions/explanations;

Rhyme verses and songs about letters, and about the words we can make with the respective letters;

Interactive phonemic pronunciation exercises/games;

Karaoke section with songs (texts) specially designed to correct troublesome pronunciations;

Little musical (or of other type) rewards.

Innovation in the field

Access to computer mediated technologies in pre-school environments does not seem to be either widespread or frequent, though it is acknowledged by parents and children that digital resources are popular with pre-school children and add to learning motivation.

In other national contexts computer-based tasks, power point presentations, video projections, video narration and use of modelling materials is also considered innovative. Digital resources recommended in some national contexts include:

- ✓ online games (matching pairs, synonyms and opposites, colours, sizes, types of foods, objects) made available by the educator;
- ✓ recreation of common day situations and imagined situations that allow for the inclusion of pictures, words and sounds;
- ✓ software that allows for free expression (drawing, painting, etc.);

It should be noted that the **use of technological and digital resources** is considered innovative through the use of interactive whiteboards and digital resources made available through the internet or cd-roms, such as e-books, multimedia alphabets (sound, letter, interactivity), educational websites, etc. However, some context recommend the use of technology only when it represents added value, i.e. when its use will bring extra benefits for children’s learning.

Innovation is also centered on sensitizing children for **plurilingualism** by promoting interest and curiosity for languages and cultures and for inter-comprehension among languages of the same family.

Innovation may also reside in using alphabet-based stories, poems or games that are imaginative.

Teachers of foreign languages tend to go back to Glen Doman method. The idea behind this method is that a child's brain is able to receive unbelievable number of information by the age of 3-4, including the acquisition of foreign languages and letters. Children that are exposed to systematic learning from an early age tend to develop faster and easier than children without it. There is also an evident difference in adolescence, where schooled children do not show temper tantrums, mood swings and are eloquent and reasonable enough to express what is affecting or bothering them.

Glen Doman method: <http://abcnews.go.com/Video/playerIndex?id=3207632>

The requirements of good digital resources

Digital resources have to be carefully planned for a successful introduction into the pre-school environment.

From the several reports it is possible to highlight what are **the requirements** of good quality educational digital resources, namely:

- ✓ They enlarge the children's language,
- ✓ They develop their thought about past, present and future;
- ✓ They develop children's logical thought and association ability;
- ✓ They enable children to reason about quantity and number, big, medium and large, a lot and a few;
- ✓ They develop motor skills and visual-motor skills.

Through the use of digital resources, the child should be able to:

- ✓ search, select, analyze and synthesize information;
- ✓ network with others for learning;
- ✓ organize digital resources;
- ✓ learn safety norms on how to use digital resources (both in connection to hardware equipment, such as sockets, as to software);

- ✓ use digital resources to strengthen reciprocal relationships (school/family; community/school, school/school).

Therefore, digital resources should be based on activities that are child-centered, that produce fun, and that involve the whole child (physical, social, emotional, psychological, and cognitive development).

They should promote learning through play, song, rhyme, drama and role play, and story with a focus on listening and speaking skills.

In what concerns ELL, they should involve lexical sets of English words through flashcards, action games, songs, chants and stories, using very simple constructs (two or three words).

It is also common practice to use a puppet to introduce English activities, creating of an English corner in the classroom or an English board for resources.

The best websites and resources **for alphabet-related activities** seem to be those which offer:

- ✓ good visual-auditory coordination and the possibility of dynamic images:
- ✓ logical structure
- ✓ integrated reading and writing activities;
- ✓ include tasks that highlight the words representing things and actions from the *real world* of the children and their culture
- ✓ provide resources that can be shared at school and at home
- ✓ offer pictures, music, lots of action, emotions, heroes, animals, nature, cars...all mixed together and performing stories based on the real world or fantasy.
- ✓ activities on making comparisons between different alphabets, similarities and differences between letters (a very challenging comparative approach will be the one with the Greek language with letters written with different graphemes)
- ✓ interactive games about animals, fruits, vegetables, and even more, they are related to cartoon heroes, or Barbie dolls which create children's world
- ✓ 10 minutes activities, the appropriate time for learning at this young age
- ✓ offer simple fun games with letters
- ✓ be based around basic themes or a basic storyline.

Examples of websites include:

- ✓ <http://junior.clopotel.ro/> implies learning the alphabet by drawing online.
- ✓ <http://www.povesti-pentru-copii.com/alfabetul-pentru-copii.html> - This is a funny way to learn the alphabet using poems or drawings in such a way that children associate every letter to a specific poem or drawing.

Although not necessarily meant for preschoolers, there are good resources on line such as 'ESL Kids Teaching the Alphabet'², which offer a series of games with the letters of the alphabet.

Examples that could easily be adapted for digital environments (quoted from the website):

"Alphabet Boxes: You need: 26 baby wipe boxes / tissue boxes, various items to go with each letter (e.g. apple magnet for the letter A) & permanent marker. Write the upper and lower case letter on each wipe box, one letter of the alphabet for each box. Get your Ss to fill each box with items that begin with that letter. Some can even be pictures of items (this can be done slowly over a matter of weeks/months). Each class show the items to the children and pass them around, this captivates the children! One box is used at a time. You don't even have to fill all the boxes at once but fill them as you go through the year. This hands-on experience is a big hit!"

"Find It: T holds up a letter flashcard and the Ss search around the room for an object beginning with that letter. (e.g. A - arm, B - book, C - clock). You can also do this activity by spreading picture flashcards around the classroom and having Ss find the picture that has the correct first letter."

"Last Letter, First Letter: (A popular Japanese game called Shiri Tori). Have the Ss sit in a circle with you. T starts by saying a word, then the S to the T's right must make a word that starts with the last letter of the word that the T said (e.g. bus --- steak --- key --- yellow --- etc.). Continue around the circle until someone makes a mistake."

Parents, librarians and other educators

In the Austrian and Irish country reports much emphasis is out on the role of parents. Parents seem to be the key-adults involved in early foreign language learning as it is

² <http://www.eslkidstuff.com/Alphabetgamescontent.htm#.UVLP3xcqwsY> accessed on 27/03/2013.

them who decide whether a child should learn a foreign language and which. It is also them who decide which will be the best method for their children to learn a foreign language, when, which and where. Parents take several initiatives at home, such as playing on-line games with children, usually games that involve a variety of sounds, good repetition and easy recognition. Parents also seem to have identified a lack of good educational material in this area as pinpointed by the Austrian report, which highlights resources created by parents:

www.kidzclub.com is often used ones because they deal with numerous phonic activities.

<http://www.redtedart.com> a personal website, kept by a parent with interesting advice for different activities.

Same as following websites:

<http://www.justmommies.com/articles/teach-alphabet.shtml>

<http://tinkerlab.com>

<http://laughpaintcreate.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.artfulparent.com>

<http://handsonaswegrow.com>

<http://www.yourchildlearns.com>

These websites and blogs are done by parents from all over the world who are keen on teaching their kids as most as possible at an early age. All of the things posted have been tried out which makes it easier to predict the outcome.

Kindergarten teachers also frequently use blogs and Facebook to exchange experiences, materials and strategies for activities with children.

Reports highlight that it is important to guarantee direct communication between teachers, to establish good rapports between parents and teachers, that newsletters can be used to make the latest information available as well as online communities.

Digital resources improve teachers' skills by introducing current training areas such as interactive teaching/ learning approaches in the fields of educator - student - parent management curriculum to strengthen the link with the community, the pedagogical approach to modern education methods, a better use of ICT in teaching, education for sustainable development.

The main characteristics for a professional development are:

- ✓ Direct relationship with the students/school.
- ✓ The use of external expertise linked to school work.

- ✓ Using the comments and feedback.
- ✓ Using a peer support system.
- ✓ Identify the centre point of the development of the participants.
- ✓ Reflections on the process of the educators involved.
- ✓ Opportunity to work with the colleagues and to share practical experiences.
- ✓ Opportunity to receive relevant/ well formulated opinions at regular intervals.
- ✓ The information obtained in a period of time to allow their inclusion in teaching.
- ✓ Opportunities for independent study.

There is a multitude of digital resources on line. Tools should be used in a carefully controlled manner through digital tools in order not to cause confusion and frustration in children. Proper training on how to use these resources is also needed for teachers and parents, who feel discouraged by the sheer quantity of resources and lack of guidance. Guidance appears to be necessary in accessing and choosing digital resources, on ICT skills and on ELL pedagogy.

Comparative approaches

As stated in the Cypriot report, early foreign language learning is mostly based on the “Language Awareness-raising or Exposure” model, the central aim of which is to develop the recognition and reproduction of different sounds and concepts of one or more languages. Thus, comparative approaches should enhance interactivity, stimulate curiosity, and encourage children to explore differences and similarities between languages and begin to formulate general ideas about how languages work.

One of the project’s innovative aspects should also be its focus on comparing language symbols (i.e. letters) and sounds (i.e. phonemes).

Useful suggestions to design comparative resources include:

- ✓ using different child avatars for each culture;

- ✓ each child avatar gives access to a series of cultural exploration activities based on drama, physical games, music and dance, plastic arts, oral and written language, and maths.
- ✓ Using characters that are bilingual (see the example of 'Dora, the Explorer')
- ✓ listen to stories from another culture and then collect words from the story;
- ✓ to draw a chart with a word in the child's mother tongue, the equivalent word in the foreign language and the related object;
- ✓ to keep those words in a treasure chest to reuse later:
- ✓ Taking as inspiration some alphabet comparisons from "Walkinthewords"³, the same letters/words could be associated to random objects in each partner language.

³ <http://walkinthewords.blogspot.pt/2011/10/random-linguistics-definitions.html>. Accessed on 19/03/2013.