

**Teachers' beliefs about teaching English  
to very young learners in Spain and  
Russia**

by

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## Abstract

Teachers' beliefs influence English language teaching and learning: classroom principles, teachers' accomplishments, learners' attitudes, teaching practices, methods, and activities. In order to understand the choices and decisions that teachers to very young learners make it is important to know and understand their beliefs.

The aim of the present study is to investigate current beliefs of English teachers to very young learners about the best methodology, the use of L1 during the lesson, and the main challenges the teachers experience when teaching very young learners, comparing the opinions of Spanish teachers with those of their colleagues from Russia.

Data for this research were collected by a questionnaire made with the help of Google forms. 49 teachers from Spain and Russia served as subjects in the study. A questionnaire was distributed to them using email and social networks.

This questionnaire has indicated the preferences teachers have in methodology to teach English to very young learners, investigated how teachers view the use of a native language during the class, and challenges they face daily when teaching this age group.

The results reveal that teachers in Spain and Russia face the following challenges when teaching very young learners: not enough English lessons per week, not having enough appropriate teaching materials, feeling under pressure to complete the syllabus, students' lack of motivation, catering to multi-level groups, maintaining discipline and teaching large classes.

It was also concluded games and other play-oriented tasks are the activities that contribute most to the children's L2 acquisition in teachers' opinion. Another important finding of the study provides some support for using L1 when teaching very young learners due to certain reasons.

The study enlightens on the topic of teaching English to very young learners.

**Keywords:** TEYL, very young learners, teachers' beliefs, L1, methodology, challenges

To My Father, Alexei Murashkin

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## **List of Abbreviations/Acronyms**

CLT	Communicative Language Teaching
EFL	English as a foreign language
ELT	English Language Teaching
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
L1	Students' first language
L2	Students' second language or the language they are currently learning
TBLT	Task-Based Learning and Teaching
TEYL	Teaching English to young learners
TPR	Total Physical Response

# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction to the Research Topic**

Teachers' beliefs have been an interesting topic for researchers due to the input they provide for the improvement of English language teaching and learning and a deep impact on their classroom principles. Teachers' beliefs affect what they accomplish in their classroom, their attitudes, and their learners' beliefs. Also, they guide teachers in adapting their teaching strategies for coping with the challenges, shaping students' learning environment, their motivation and language ability (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017, p 78).

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the current beliefs of English teachers to very young learners about the best methodology, the use of L1 during the lesson, and the main challenges the teachers experience when teaching very young learners. Also, we are going to compare the opinions of Spanish teachers with those of their colleagues from Russia.

The level of correspondence between the beliefs of the teachers and their practices in terms of the factors mentioned above is also discussed: the study examines teachers' considerations about their actual classroom practices when teaching very young learners, how often they use L1 during the lesson, and for what purposes they believe they can do it.

English teachers of very young learners might apply the aforementioned considerations during their lessons. Also, some valuable insights may be received by curriculum or syllabus designers, material and test developers if they are informed of the different challenges the teachers face working with very young learners and practices they use on an everyday basis. "The study of teachers' beliefs can help researchers gain insight in the decisions teachers take in the classroom and it is also

vital that teacher training programmes take teacher cognition into account” (Roothoof, 2017, p.213).

Besides, as Garton et al. (2011, p.16) state, “there is a need for greater opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences amongst teachers of English both nationally and internationally.”

Thus, the main objective of the study is to explore current beliefs of English teachers to very young learners in Spain and Russia about the following issues:

- the best methodology to teach very young learners;
- the use of L1 in the classroom;
- the main challenges they find when teaching very young learners.

This approach leads to a comparison of teachers' opinions in Spain and Russia.

The Master’s thesis is divided into five sections. The first and the second sections provide the context of the work.

Chapter 1 introduces the research topic, provides theoretical justification and background information for the work on English language teaching to very young learners including Spain and Russia and explains the motivation and problem statement. Chapter 2 includes a review of the relevant literature, defines the research questions, and lays out the hypotheses. This chapter examines English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers’ beliefs about teaching young learners, gives a brief overview of approaches and practices to teach English to very young learners, and analyses the benefits and challenges of teaching English in early childhood.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology that is used in the research along with the various aspects of this methodology: participants, procedures, and data collection instruments.

In the fourth section, an analysis is presented according to the subsections of the questionnaire used to gather the information for the paper: demographic, closed-ended items, and open-ended items data.

The next section discusses the results.

Our conclusions together with implications of the research, its limitations, and further work suggestions are drawn in the final section.

## **1.2 Teaching English to very young learners**

Early childhood is a period from birth to eight years old, a time of remarkable growth with brain development at its peak (UNESCO, 2015). The Early Years are also referred to as early childhood. They both mean the same thing (Gilmour, S. & Chapelton, T., n.d.).

The expression *young learner* is applied to children from the age of three to twelve (Bland, 2015, p.1). Nunan (2011) argues that the term “young learner” covers a larger chronological age span: from 3 to 15 years of age. Slatterly & Willis (as cited by Kang Shin, 2006) define “young learners” as those of age 7–12 years old and “very young learners” - under 7 years of age.

According to Zhexembinova (2016), one year of age makes a huge difference among children, so the generalizations made for young learners may need more detailed analysis and some sub-categorization. Based on Ersöz (2007) she divides the young learners into three categories: very young learners (3-6 years old), young learners (7-9 years old), and older/late young learners (10-12 years old).

We are going to take a closer look at the age of 3 - 6 years old in our research. The reason for this choice is that nowadays more and more academies, training centers and language schools around the world are accepting students who are 3 years old and above.

Early childhood education varies across countries around the world and the question at what age kids should start English lessons is still controversial: some specialists recommend starting English lessons with children aged 3-4 years old, others suggest waiting for a more conscious age: 5-6 years (English for children, 2020). However, in most countries, there are more and more very young learners every year. The number of people who are studying English increases, beginning at younger and younger ages (Kang Shin & Crandall, 2014).

One of the sustainable development targets of the “Education 2030. Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action” agenda is “by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development” and “care” which includes “at least one foreign language offered as a subject” due to the increased global social, environmental and economic interdependence and multilingual contexts that foster bi- and multilingual education (UNESCO, 2015).

As reported by Enever & Moon (2009), in Europe the prevailing trend, promoted by a ‘strong recommendation’ from the EU policy group, is to introduce the first foreign language from the early Primary or pre-school phase.

As the age of compulsory English education is becoming lower and lower in countries around the world, teaching English to young learners (TEYL) has become its own field of study (Kang Shin, 2006, p.2).

However, as Nunan claims, there is no empirical evidence supporting the idea that an early start in English language learning in foreign language contexts produces better English speakers (as cited by Kang Shin, 2006). It seems that levels of a proficiency depend on other factors. For example, the type of program and curriculum, number of hours spent in English class, techniques and activities used by teachers (Rixon, 2000, p.2).

Thus, as an early start alone is not always the solution, the question arises: how EFL teachers of young learners can make the most of the flexibility of young minds to grow better speakers of English? While the age for English education lowers in classrooms across the globe, EFL teachers of young learners struggle to keep up with this trend and seek effective ways of teaching (Kang Shin, 2006, p.2).

### **1.3 English language teaching to very young learners in Spain and Russia**

Ensuring the quality of early childhood education and care has become a policy priority in many countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2015, p.1). In those countries where the teaching of a second language during early childhood education is not mandatory, it is a frequent occurrence in pre-primary institutions and even a recommendation (Mourão, 2015, p.52) since English has become the world's lingua franca.

Although education for children under the age of six is not compulsory in Spain, most children between 3 and 5 years old (about 97%) attend pre-primary education (OECD, 2015). Pre-primary education is represented by the public, semi-public and private schools. On average across Spain, 48% of children enrolled in early childhood development programmes attend private institutions (OECD, 2015, p.2).

In Russia, preprimary education exists in the form of nursery schools for infants aged six-weeks- to three-years-old and kindergartens for children aged three- to six-years-old (Russian Federation. Preprimary & Primary education, 2021).

Pre-school is optional in Russia, although many families do sign their children up for state or private kindergartens (The Russian education system: An overview, 2021). 98.97% of children aged 3-6 years old are enrolled in pre-school education of all types of institutions (Bodrova & Yudina, 2018, p.61). Private preschools, including

family nursery schools and kindergartens, are gradually gaining popularity (Russian Federation. Preprimary & Primary education, 2021).

Preschool programs in Russia, especially in the last year of kindergarten, include classes, which aim to prepare the children for primary school such as language development, singing, art, etc. The nationwide interest in foreign languages accounts for their introduction into preschool curricula (Russian Federation. Preprimary & Primary education, 2021). However, according to the law, parents are not charged for basic educational services but must pay for enrichment programs such as foreign language classes offered by the preschool (Bodrova & Yudina, 2018, p.61).

As per the private schools, they are relatively uncommon in Russia. Such schools emphasize learning English and other critical skills. There are also international schools for ex-pat children but they are only located in major Russian cities such as Moscow (Russian Schools. Structure of system, ages of entry and certificates, 2021).

In Russia students generally begin learning English from grade 2 which corresponds to the age of 8 years old at public schools.

In Spain, while national legislation only requires a foreign language to be taught from the same age as in Russia (from aged 8 onward), most of Spain's autonomous communities have established programmes by which all children begin learning English at the age of 6, or even 3 (Roothoof, 2017, p.212).

As a matter of fact, in the last 15 years, the Spanish education system has placed an increasing emphasis on the teaching of English. Since 2006, autonomous communities can decide to make the learning of a foreign language compulsory for children attending pre-primary education. In 2014 nearly all students in primary education studied at least one foreign language. Between 2011 and 2016, the country

substantially increased the instruction time for foreign language teaching in primary education (European Commission, 2017, p.33).

In contrast to the rest of the world, where the number of English learners is increasing and their age decreasing, even if Russia emphasizes the importance of developing multilingual citizens who possess advanced intercultural competence (Calafato, 2020, p.603), the country is still lagging behind this global linguistic unification process: only 5.5% of the Russians speak English as a second language (Abramova et al., 2013, p. 99). People in Russia don't tend to speak English as well as people do in other countries such as Spain, Korea, or Italy (Johnson, 2020). This warrants the necessity to update and develop English language teaching strategies, enabling Russian speakers to attain sufficient English language skills (Abramova et al., 2013, p. 99).

Another much-discussed aspect of education in every country that can influence the teaching process and lead to some challenges is the class size. The average primary school class in Spain has 22 students (OECD, 2015, p.3).

Unlike the Spanish system, in Russia the language is taught in small classes: up to 10-12 students (Abramova et al., 2013, p.102). Foreign language lessons aim to develop students' intercultural competence and their understanding of how languages influence communication, cognition, self-realization, self-education in various fields of knowledge, and self-development throughout life (Russian Academy of Education, 2017, p.33, 38).

The Russian Ministry of Education's federal standards for foreign language education in schools emphasize the importance of teaching foreign languages using communicative and cognitive approaches. Their special focus is on developing multifunctionality (acquiring the means of interpersonal and intercultural communication);



multilevel learning (mastering the morphosyntax and lexis of a language and the four language skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading and writing); multi-subject and interdisciplinary use (developing universal learning skills via foreign languages that ensure effective work with the information presented in different formats and from different fields of knowledge such as literature, art, history, geography, and mathematics (Calafato, 2020, p. 606).

Although, Abramova et al. (2013) report that there is a lack of studies that focus on the specific characteristics of non-native English teaching and learning in Russia, as well as on limitations of English classrooms where monolingual Russian students are brought by mandatory public education curriculum, Russia is slowly opening up to the ESL world. English is being valued more and more by all of Russian society (Johnson, 2020). Nowadays there are a great variety of different establishments that provide English lessons: private language schools (academies), kindergartens, international schools (Teach English in Russia, 2021).

The differences and similarities between Russian and Spanish educational systems and the ways of teaching English to very young learners are demonstrated in the comparative table (Appendix A).

To conclude, in both countries students can start to learn English from early childhood even if due to the national legislation requirements a foreign language is usually taught from the age of 8. In Spain, this opportunity is provided by autonomous communities' programmes or by academies, private and semi-private schools. In Russia students also can learn English from the yearly years at language and private schools as well as at most private kindergartens.

The main differences between the countries are the class size that influences the process of education a lot, a predominance of non-native English teaching in Russia,

and the Russians “lagging behind” as speakers of English as a foreign language comparing to the world in general.

#### **1.4 A statement of the problem**

Previous research has indicated that teachers possess a great range of compound beliefs about pedagogical issues. In order to understand the choices and decisions teachers make, it is important to accept the nature and role of their beliefs. According to Khader (2012), it is widely recognized that the teachers’ beliefs play a key role in their teaching practices and are manifested in the methods, activities the teachers choose and in the decisions they make.

Gilakjani & Sabouri (2017) define the term “belief”, explain the nature of teachers’ beliefs, and express their sources. Kaça (2015) examines teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding cultural content in the English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom in Turkey, while Roothoof (2017) investigates beliefs and attitudes of primary school English teachers about teaching methodology and the use of the mother tongue in Spain.

However, little is known about the practices and attitudes of English teachers to very young learners around the world, particularly in Spain and Russia, even less was done to compare the beliefs and opinions of the teachers from those two countries.

Other research, conducted by Blackman (2013-2014), investigates teachers' use of the L1 in primary classrooms in Belarus and shows that teachers do use the L1 in class, and that the extent of use varies: almost half of the primary school teachers use the L1 for at least a third of the lesson. However, teachers do not do it randomly but employ the L1 for specific functions: teaching grammar, vocabulary, for interpersonal reasons and classroom management.

The research also finds teachers believe a lack of experience can force a teacher into using the L1 by “not knowing the right word in English or an alternative scaffolding technique” (Blackman, 2013-2014, p.48).

In addition, if the research suggests the native language has a role in the language classroom, it is useful to know to what extent teachers of very young learners in Russia and Spain believe they use it and for what purposes to gain a general understanding of English language teaching to very young learners in these countries.

Calafato (2020) reports on the beliefs of English secondary school teachers in Norway and Russia regarding the benefits of being or becoming multilingual and the promotion of multilingualism in their respective countries. Moreover, the research provides some useful information about the Russian foreign language curricula.

Given the limited number of studies on the beliefs of language teachers (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017; Khader, 2012; Kaça, 2015; Roothoof, 2017), especially those teaching very young learners, since nowadays English is being introduced at ever-earlier ages and teachers have a key role in making a decision about what happens during the lesson, it is important to take their attitudes and beliefs into account. Borg, Buehl and Beck argue that beliefs have been found to influence classroom practice (as cited in Roothoof, 2017; p.212). Besides, the identity of teachers affects their values and beliefs (Phillips, 1993; Cameron, 2001; Slattery and Willis, 2001).

Taking all of this into account, this study reduces its focus to three research questions. Their rationale is to identify the best methodology for teaching English to very young learners in the teacher’s opinion. Then, it explores whether there are differences or similarities between teachers’ views on the use of L1 during the lesson in Spain and Russia. Lastly, it tries to determine to what extent the main challenges the

teachers experience in teaching English to very young learners coincide in Spain and Russia. Specifically, the research questions are:

Q1 What do the teachers in both countries believe to be the best methodology for teaching English to very young learners?

Q2 What differences and/or similarities exist between the views of English teachers' for very young learners on the use of L1 during the lesson in Spain and Russia?

Q3 To what extent the main challenges the teachers experience in teaching English to very young learners coincide in Spain and Russia?

The following hypotheses are developed from the research questions:

H1. The teachers in both countries believe activities within play-based learning are the best method for teaching English to very young learners.

H2. The teachers' views on the use of L1 during the lesson when teaching young learners are similar in both countries.

H3. There is more obvious variation in the main challenges the teachers experience in teaching English to very young learners in Spain and Russia.

## 2 Literature Review

As the present study focuses on English teacher's beliefs about teaching English to very young learners in Spain and Russia, the literature review deals with different approaches and practices to teach English to very young learners, benefits and challenges of teaching English in early childhood, the concept of beliefs and the importance of conducting research on this topic. Thus, previous studies on EFL teachers' beliefs in different countries are discussed.

Many research studies of teaching English to young learners and very young learners, based on empirical research, theoretical research, action research and teaching observation over many years, have been conducted mostly in Europe and focusing on children and their learning in mainstream schooling. For instance, some of the challenges the teachers of state schools in Europe face while implementing the policy of early start have been described by Enever (2009) in connection with policy decisions and classroom practices: class size, teacher quality, resource provision, use of a native language, school curricula design and approaches to the teaching and learning.

Mourão (2015) investigates practices and approaches with a close look at routines and formats when teaching English to very young learners. The activities that “take into consideration the educational attributes of pre-primary education” are songs, rhymes, riddles, chants, crafts, games, Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, projects, stories, drama and routine activities (Mourão, 2015, p.55).

In our work, we are going to investigate which approaches and activities teachers believe are the most useful and appropriate for teaching very young learners. That is why we need to be familiar with the approaches, practices and models existing around the world as well as with the ones that are used in the educational institution a teacher works at.

As authors, we have selected the issues that are considered to be critical for teaching very young learners and most in need of attention, and this has influenced the choice of topics covered in the paper: the best methodology to teach very young learners, the use of L1 during the lesson, and the main challenges the teachers face when teaching very young learners.

## **2.1 Approaches and practices to teach English to very young learners**

There is a lot of research being done on how children acquire and learn languages. The British Council<sup>1</sup> claims that very young children learn English as an additional language through good memories: having fun, being involved, and having some kind of context to link it to. Consequently, teachers and parents can help them progress by often changing the activities and finding things that engage them.

Kuhl (2010) explores through lab experiments that babies learn one language over another by listening to the humans around them and "taking statistics" on the sounds they need to know. She believes that the children are "geniuses" until they turn seven, and then there's a systematic decline. Brown (1994) inspects the factors that influence second language acquisition, the personal variables within oneself, and the reflection of that self to other people that affect our communicative interaction. A crucial aspect of the communicative process ("a part of the egocentric self" in the process of a transaction) is the learning of another culture and the relationship of culture learning to second language learning. Moreover, the presence of two cultures, in contrast, creates personal and transactional barriers that should be overcome by learners (Brown, 1994, p.163).

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<sup>1</sup> course "English in Early Childhood: Language Learning and Development" presented on Futurelearn platform (<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/english-in-early-childhood>)

Some second language acquisition theories give primary importance to learner's innate capacity for language acquisition. Others emphasize the role of the environment. Still, others focus on learner's engagement with the broader social context (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p.29).

It is well known, that young learners depend on the teacher a lot because they have not yet developed many general learning strategies, and need to learn strategies while they are learning a language. Since innate abilities are particularly important for this age group, it is helpful to use the following techniques and approaches when teaching young learners: a rhythm (in which the children can find certain pleasure); technology (to stimulate their natural curiosity and interest); picturebooks (that are usually met with excitement); intercultural mediation (to satisfy their interest in others), drama (a will to play); task-based instruction, Content and Language Integrated Learning and immersion approaches (to meet children's need to learn implicitly). All this is highly challenging for teachers but at the same time rewarding (Bland, 2015, p.4).

Lots of authors, including Whitebread (2012) emphasize the importance of children's play. This idea that children learn best through play is not new, with the likes of Piaget, Montessori, Reggio Emilia and even the UK's Department for Education promoting the value of play in early years education (Cass, 2020, para. 4). Vygotsky (1966) claims that play is the leading line of development in the preschool years (age from 3 to 6 years) and Dewar (2008-2014) confirms the cognitive benefits of play in his work.

Game and song-oriented techniques help students to stay in the learning current and the teacher to enhance students' learning vocabulary, expressions, grammar (simple rules) and comprehension. The game and song drill help the students interact with their friends and gain some problem-solving skills (Putro et al., n.d., p.1).

Nonetheless, Nuktong claims that the most common form of teaching found at primary and early learning levels is still the situation when young learners are taught in the same way as (young) adults, with little opportunity for creativity, actual language use, and with little enjoyment (as cited in Cheep-Aranai et al., 2015). Many children become bored and demotivated and start to view English as an object of study only.

Six main effective teaching practices are highlighted by Kang Shin & Crandall (2014):

1. Using fun and engaging activities: teachers should deliver language instructions in a way connected to the characteristics of young learners and how they learn.
2. Students' engagement in a variety of interactions: there should be a lot of chances for students to interact with each other and a teacher.
3. Catering to different learning styles and intelligences: teachers need to use different learning styles and intelligences to connect learners and the language content.
4. Making language learning meaningful and relevant: a connection between the language and real-life context.
5. Introducing learners to different cultures: teachers should use materials that reflect both home and international cultures.
6. Using various teaching strategies that set up learners for success: building a positive attitude toward English.

While the recommendations listed above are applicable for teaching both young learners and very young learners, there are some ideas that suit very young learners' needs best. These ideas were expressed by teachers from the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia countries during the online EFL teacher education



course designed for teachers, teacher supervisors, and other TEYL professionals (Kang Shin, 2006, p.2-6). The teachers recommend supplementing activities with visuals, realia, and movement; to involve students in making visuals and realia; to move from activity to activity; to use stories and contexts familiar to students; to establish classroom routines in English and to use L1 as a resource when necessary.

Reilly and Ward (1997), Roth (1998) and Dunn (2012) advocate for songs, rhymes, riddles, chants, craft activities and games, TPR activities, stories, projects, puppets, drama to be included in early language learning to foster spontaneous language acquisition (as cited in Mourão, 2015).

Putro et al. (n.d.) state that the TPR teaching method is very useful since students learning new things are able to try them directly in practice. Besides, TPR appeals to a number of learning styles and recognizes a “silent period” during which the learner is absorbing the new language and cannot yet produce new words with confidence (Zhexembinova, 2016, p.24). Thus, for very young learners English should be a tool for other activities rather than a subject, so children can use it in everyday and playful situations. Here, once again, the concept of play-based learning appears (Mourão, 2015, p.56)

As per effective approaches for teaching young learners, certain types of ELT methodologies have gained popularity worldwide, including Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT). Moreover, respective educational policies asked teachers to adopt various related concepts, including learner-centered teaching, the use of authentic materials, activities and so forth. However, if teachers employ these methods locally, reinterpretation and adaptation are usually essential if they wish to account for the influence of various local factors (Butler, 2009, p.27-28).

The approaches recommended for teaching English to young learners are, perhaps, the biggest and most complex of the policy decisions impacting the classroom around the world. In many countries, this has led to the introduction of some form of CLT or task-based instruction. This is the case, for example, in Korea, Hong Kong, China, Turkey and Thailand. Even so, the CLT is more appropriate to teach small groups of students in well-equipped classrooms but not in overcrowded classrooms with few resources (Garton et al., 2011, p.5). Besides, the teachers may apply the approaches in their own unique way (Kang Shin, 2014, p.58) or, as it has been mentioned above, they may not receive the necessary training and qualifications that get them to struggle to apply CLT effectively in a classroom (Al-Ali & Mann, 2019, p.70).

One can see this in the persistent popularity of the communicative approach to language teaching, where the emphasis is regularly placed on complete immersion in the target language (Calafato, 2020, p.603).

Curriculum and materials need to provide learning experiences that are motivating, suited to children's cognitive and linguistic levels and take account of their special instincts and preferred ways of learning because children's early phase of language learning can create positive attitudes and a lifelong interest in the language if it is done appropriately. Therefore, many teachers around the world agree that young learners need an experiential approach with the following characteristics: activity-based and contextualized; focused on communication (meaning) rather than form, play and fun-oriented with a strong oral emphasis initially and plenty of teacher support and scaffolding (Moon, 2005, p.33).

However, a great deal more analysis should take place to identify exactly how the children participate and learn and which activities contribute most to their L2 acquisition (Cheep-Aranai, et al., 2015, p.155).

## **2.2 Benefits and challenges of teaching English in early childhood**

Implementing the policy of teaching English in early childhood has both positive and negative consequences. Among the advantages of beginning early we can name having more time to fit English into the daily programme by young children and to learn through play-like activities; using individual, innate language-learning strategies to acquire English. Children who have the opportunity to pick up a second language while they are still young appear to use the same innate language-learning strategies throughout life when learning other languages (Dunn, n. d., para. 6).

Besides, young children who acquire language rather than consciously learn it, as older children and adults have to, are more likely to have better pronunciation, fluency and feel for the language and culture (Dunn, n. d., para.7; Kang Shin & Crandall, 2014, p.5; Read, 2003, p.6; Rixon, 2000, p.2).

Children are born ready, able and eager to learn. They actively reach out to interact with other people, and in the world around them. They develop quickly in the early years (Early Education, 2012).

Some other benefits for children can be creating children's confidence in language learning and positive attitudes/motivation towards the language for the future and so helping to sustain children's language learning; widening children's cultural horizons and developing intercultural understanding, making children more aware of language as a phenomenon in its own right (Moon, 2005). There are also clear potential benefits to society in terms of citizenship, democracy, tolerance, peace, and an enhanced economy through a better-trained workforce (Read, 2003, p.6).

According to Johnstone (as cited in Bland, 2015), early foreign language learning can have an important educational outcome: 'there can be a positive influence

on children's general educational development (e.g. cognitive, emotional, cultural) and on the formation of a multilingual and intercultural identity.'

Read (2003) agrees that the younger is better but only when certain conditions are met: the learning process is natural, interesting, enjoyable, contextualised and part of a real event. Besides, learning should be relevant, memorable and belong to the child while the child is challenged appropriately and there's a sense of achievement.

Although starting a language in early childhood has a lot of benefits, teachers and educators cannot rely on an early start only to increase the English level of their students (Kang Shin & Crandall, 2014, p.7). All the benefits mentioned above can be supported by successful examples from different countries, but it is important to remember that success depends on the way in which an early language learning programme is implemented, on the conditions and the methods, and not on the age factor alone (Rixon, 2000, p.2).

In addition, there are a lot of challenges in the introduction of early foreign language learning in state school systems today. The common belief is if introduced to a foreign language early, future generations will be better equipped to communicate locally, regionally and globally. The real process of embedding such policies securely at national and local levels has just begun and hence the knowledge of how this might be achieved as well as the published research in the field is limited (Enever & Moon, 2009, p.15).

Copland et al. (2013) state, *teachers' low proficiency and language levels* and their *lack of confidence* in their ability are common challenges for teachers around the world. Al-Ali & Mann (2019) provide a rich description of the English teachers' perceptions about the main challenges in teaching primary stage pupils in Kuwait. The

results of their survey revealed that English teachers are challenged by several factors including lack of training, resources and knowledge.

Mourão claims that teachers who work with very young learners require both pedagogical (an understanding of the principles of child development along with pedagogy principles) and language skills (speaking fluently, confidently and spontaneously to children in English choosing the language that is most appropriate for the certain age group) and certain competencies such as being good communicators, dedication to job and love to children, the ability to create a relaxed atmosphere, the ability to motivate, etc.

Meanwhile, nowadays qualification requirements are not specified in a lot of countries (for instance, Czech Republic) and, usually, inexperienced teachers are allowed to teach pre-primary and more experienced teachers to teach upper primary (for example, Poland). However, since teachers to young learners and very young learners provide the main language input for children who may have limited exposure outside the classroom, they need very good English language and interaction skills, but “it is often difficult to find this combination of professional knowledge and linguistic competence among trained primary teachers“ (Moon, 2005, p.32).

The evidence that English teachers of very young learners around the world tend to have little training in child pedagogy together with low language proficiency shows that current practice should be reconsidered on many levels.

One of the challenges that prevent teachers from teaching a foreign language effectively is teaching materials. During the last few years, important developments have taken place in this field and, as a result, there is a great variety of teaching aids and teaching materials at the teacher's disposal (Zhexembinova, 2016, p.26). Still, Mathew and Pani (as cited Al-Ali & Mann, 2019) claim that many countries have not got

appropriate textbooks to teach young learners English in classrooms. Quite often teachers of very young learners need to create materials themselves. Consequently, appropriate books are either not available or are not used in the classroom. Other resources may also be unavailable (Copland, et al., 2013, p.740).

When designing learning experiences and creating tasks and materials, different stages of a child's development need to be taken into consideration. Also, special strategies that help to maintain motivation should be set out by a teacher, such as providing evidence of progress, personalization of the learning process, etc. Since young children have a limited attention span, activities should be varied so the learners do not "switch off". Whenever there is more than one student in a learning group, teachers will have diversity. In catering to diversity, learning styles and strategies are particularly important. As per the assessment, all teaching tasks can be turned into in-class assessment tools if there are criteria for judging the task and a feedback mechanism for students (Nunan, 2011, p.7-12). Here the necessity to highlight such main challenges in teaching English to young learners as *cognitive development, motivation, attention, multi-level groups, and assessment* arise (Nunan, 2011).

In addition, as English becomes increasingly embedded in primary and pre-primary education in many countries around the world, governments have generally based their new young learners' curricula on the principles of CLT. However, there has often been a gap between policy and practice, and teachers face many *challenges in implementing policy* (British Council & TESOL Italy, 2016).

There are a number of classroom-based factors that sometimes militate against teachers following national policy: large classes, control and discipline problems connected with using a learner-centered approach in large classes, number of English lessons per week, etc.

The problem of large classes is especially common for countries in East Asia (Zhou & Ng, 2016, p.141), though it is a challenge for teachers in many parts of the world (Copland et al., 2013, p.741). Teachers believe that since it is harder or impossible to closely monitor students' language use or intervene in pair work and group work in large classes, the introduction of learner-centered teaching also becomes difficult (Garton et al., 2011, p.7).

Teachers believe that there is a connection between the number of hours per week dedicated to English and fulfilling the syllabus. According to Ho (as cited in Garton et al., 2011 ) teachers with a low number of hours per week believe they cannot introduce learner-centered teaching and also cover the syllabus. Hence, one of the challenges that teachers all around the world face is *not enough hours of English at school*. As teachers' strategies may be affected by the amount of instruction time available for each class in the school (Kwok Shing, 2016, p.200), it is worth knowing how often the teachers see their students per week.

Shankar & Gunashekar (2016) add that along with the named factors there are issues such as the pressure to 'cover the syllabus' in general, to teach what will be tested, lack of time and resources to truly implement activity-oriented learning.

Copland et al. (2013) used a mixed-methods approach (a survey, observations and interviews) to obtain the data from 4,459 primary teachers of English from five different countries in order to know the challenges they face. The study shows that the main challenges are teaching speaking, grammar and writing, motivation, differentiating learning, teaching large classes and discipline. The authors argue that teacher education should support teachers to meet the challenges they have identified.

Another common challenge is that in some countries *English is not used widely among English teachers* to young learners during the lesson. Some teachers do not even

tend to use English most of the time: they ask questions in a native language, etc. (Al-Ali & Mann, 2019, p.71).

Studies of Chern, Lee, Lefever and Nikolov (as cited in Enever & Moon, 2009) report that English teachers often use more L1 in classrooms than is desirable (in most of the countries English through English is the desired norm or at least conducting the greater part of the foreign language lesson in the L1 is supposed to be avoided). Education authorities usually determine that English should be taught through English in order to increase exposure to the language. In reality, many teachers teaching English to young learners make frequent use of L1. It is influenced by different factors: their level of proficiency and confidence; their ability to adjust their language to the children's level; large class sizes; their concern that children should understand, etc. (Enever & Moon, 2009, p.13).

It should be noted that EFL teachers in Russia also face many challenges. The main of them is *being the dominance of the traditional teacher-centered method*. When a teacher is put at the center of the learning process, he or she serves as students' main linguistic role model and provides the main source of linguistic and cultural information for them. Therefore, such an approach limits students' learning opportunities and puts additional strain on a teacher (Abramova et al., 2013, p. 100).

Besides, the teacher-centered approach leads to the problem of limited foreign language oral communication in the class: in terms of communication situations, topics diversity and the number of communication participants. In general, English is taught in small academic groups, which are isolated not only from native language speakers but also from other groups within the same educational institution. This prevents students from polishing their language skills and developing communication competence since their peers and the teacher are most likely to understand them regardless of such



constraints as vocabulary or grammar mistakes, heavy accent, etc. (Abramova et al., 2013, p. 102).

### **2.3 EFL teachers' beliefs about teaching young learners**

The most important factor in any child's education is the teacher. This is what educational research continually reminds us. Effective programs for young learners have well-trained teachers with adequate proficiency in English (Kang Shin & Crandall, 2014, p.11).

Understanding, judgment and evaluation of teachers' practices can be provided by understanding teachers' personal constructs, or, as they are usually defined as "Teachers' beliefs" (Hao Yang & Pun, 2008, p.272). Beliefs are judgments and opinions that a person makes about him- or herself, about others, and about the world around. They are convictions of the person based on observation or logical reasoning (Khader, 2012, p.77). Pehkonen and Pietilä (2003) defined the term "belief" as a subjective and experience-based knowledge.

Teachers' beliefs are their views and values about teaching students and the education process. They are the attitudes held by the teachers about the teaching and learning process, which "influence his/her classroom practices" (Khader, 2012, p.77).

Buehl & Beck provide the following definition of the term: a complex system of explicitly and implicitly held assumptions regarding the legitimacy of a given proposition related to teaching (as cited in Calafato, 2020).

Teaching language requires both systems of knowledge: the language and culture but these, as Thomas states, "are filtered through systems of beliefs – beliefs about language and beliefs about the world" (as cited in Bou, 1998).

Li (as cited in Gilakjani1 & Sabouri, 2017) represented that beliefs have a key role in language teaching: they help people make sense of the world, impacting how

new information is understood, and whether it is accepted or rejected; they depict memories and adjust our understanding of occurrences.

Farrell & Ives argue that understanding the beliefs of language teachers is important since their beliefs influence their teaching practices (as cited in Calafato, 2020). Without considering teachers' beliefs on a given subject, it is almost impossible to make any improvements to teaching approaches.

Teachers' beliefs have a greater effect than the teachers' knowledge on planning their lessons, on the types of decisions they adopt, and on classroom practice. They identify their real behavior towards their learners (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2017, p.78).

A number of studies have been done that examined the connection between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices (Bisland, O'Conner, and Malow-Iroff, 2009) and about how teachers' beliefs affect teachers (Chou, 2008).

One of the examples can be the use of L1 during the lesson. Varied exogenous and endogenous factors influence teachers' beliefs towards L1 usage during the lesson. However, as per Thompson (2006), only a few formal studies of teachers' actual use of L1 in the classroom exist. For instance, Duff & Polio (as cited in Blackman, 2013-2014) discovered that teachers did use the L1; Macaro (2001) claimed that EFL teachers found the L1 practical.

Thus, formal empirical investigations into teachers' L1 use remain limited (Thompson, 2006). Moreover, the number of published studies of countries where Russian is an official language is low (Blackman, 2013-2014, p.7).

Gilakjani & Sabouri (2017) claim that what teachers understand about particular changes in English language teaching is related to what they believe about it. Consequently, in order to have a deeper understanding of the specific changes in

English language teaching, it is necessary for teachers to have a deeper understanding of their beliefs.

### 3 Methodology

The study included the results obtained from the specially designed questionnaire and the theoretical materials that existed on the topic. Brown (as cited in Gass & Mackey, p.167) categorized questionnaires as part of survey-based research, a distinct category from qualitative and quantitative research, which he referred to as "interpretive and statistical methods."

The questionnaire aimed to get information about teachers' background and their beliefs and opinions on the items directly connected with the research questions. It provided both qualitative insights and quantifiable data.

The physical layout on a page or a format of the questionnaire consisted of three parts:

*demographics* (Part 1 of the questionnaire)

*closed-ended* items (Part 2 of the questionnaire)

*open-ended* items (Part 3 of the questionnaire).

The demographics section includes information about the questionnaire itself (the name of the questionnaire, the date of administration) and information about the respondents. The purpose of providing information about the questionnaire was to identify it as a research document (Griffiee, 2012, p.136).

Closed-ended items (for example, Likert scale questions) represented the second part of the questionnaire and provided quantifiable data about the construct of interest. They asked respondents to choose an option. Usually, closed-ended items are often easier and faster to answer than open-ended items (Griffiee, 2012, p.136).

The last part of the questionnaire included open-ended items and demonstrated respondents' opinions and beliefs about the research topic.

The questionnaire was used to gather data from both closed-ended items and open-ended items because they complement each other (Griffiee, 2012, p. 141). Data from closed-ended items were fairly easy to collect and was analyzed using a variety of statistical procedures. Data from open-ended items were not as easy to analyze, but using these data was still an advantage because open-ended questions provide a fuller explanation.

All aspects of the study are presented further.

### **3.1 Participants**

There were 49 participants in total. 28 participants were English teachers in Spain who work at state, private, online schools, language academies, training centers, and as freelance teachers. 21 participants were English teachers in Russia working in the following educational institutions: state, private, online schools, language academies, training centers, kindergartens, and as a tutor providing private lessons<sup>2</sup>.

The respondents represent the population of all English teachers of very young learners in Russia and Spain. Since Russia is a huge country, as many federal subjects as possible were included. Among them is the Republic of Karelia, the Republic of Tatarstan, Leningrad Oblast, Omsk Oblast, Saint Petersburg, Perm Krai, etc.

The participants were selected through connections that the researcher had in Spain and Russia (they were contacted by email or social networks and volunteered to take part). Also, the participants were encouraged to fill in the questionnaire through publishing several posts on social media and specific platforms for teachers. For the research validity, the questionnaire was anonymous so no email addresses were

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, the total number of respondents was 50. After comparing the answers of the teachers in Russia and during the preliminary analysis, the conclusion that respondents 11 and 12 were the same person was made because they provided absolutely the same answers even for open-item questions. Therefore, answers of respondent #12 were excluded. Thus, instead of 22 respondents in Russia, there were 21.

collected. The teachers were asked for their permission to use this information in a study before they completed the sections.

The first part of the questionnaire was created to gather participant data and contained questions about teachers' academic background, their language proficiency and other descriptors that fit the research questions.

Since in a post-positivistic world the researcher is not seen as an outside, uninvolved observer (Griffie, 2012, p.30), the "Participants" part of the paper includes the information about the researcher too. The researcher was a teacher of English working at one of the English academies in Spain with a Russian background and more than 4 years of teaching experience in teaching English to young learners.

### **3.2 Data collection instruments**

The research design used was a survey. This approach is well known and widespread in many countries (Griffie, 2012, p.52). "Surveys have broad appeal...because they are perceived as a reflection of the attitudes, preferences, and opinions of the very people" (Rea & Parker, 2014, p.3).

The data were collected through a questionnaire (Appendix B). The questionnaire as a subset of survey research was chosen because, as Gass & Mackey (2005) claim, the survey, typically in the form of a questionnaire, is one of the most common methods of collecting data on attitudes and opinions. Moreover, it allows researchers to gather the information that participants can report about themselves (self-reported data), such as their beliefs and information based on what they think, believe, or recall from previous experiences.

Thus, since the aim of the paper was to research teachers' beliefs, the questionnaire was one of the most appropriate tools to do so. Besides, the same data-gathering instrument had been chosen in one of the studied theoretical materials on the

topic to portray the world and local trends in challenges English teachers to young learners face (Copland et al., 2013).

In addition, a questionnaire is a very convenient instrument because a substantial amount of data can be gathered from a group of participants in a fairly short period of time.

The questionnaire was created in Google forms and administered online: the participants received a link to the questionnaire. Since the questionnaire was administered only once, it was cross-sectional.

To maximize the effectiveness of the questionnaire, we followed the recommendations presented in Gass & Mackey (2005, p.96) and tried to provide a simple and uncluttered format along with unambiguous, answerable questions.

Also, the questionnaire was reviewed by several researchers and one native-English speaker as well as piloted among a representative sample of the research population (2 teachers in Spain and 2 teachers in Russia) to ensure the correct respondents' interpretations of the questions. Since no changes were made after the piloting, the four pilot teachers' answers were included in the analysis.

*The construct* of the questionnaire was the beliefs of English teachers to very young learners in Russia and Spain about the best methodology for teaching English to very young learners; the use of L1 during the lesson when teaching very young learners and the main challenges the teachers experience in teaching English to very young learners. All aspects of the defined construct were represented in the questionnaire to avoid the possibility that one or more parts of the construct would not be measured.

The purpose of this questionnaire was to gather information on the beliefs of English teachers to very young learners comparing the opinions of Spanish teachers with those of their colleagues from Russia.

To avoid a low return rate which could result in low generalizability without high reliability, some guidelines suggested by Brown (2001, p. 86) were used: a cover letter, keeping the questionnaire short, using follow-up letters and messages.

Besides, the questionnaire was not translated into any of the teachers' native languages (L1) because the translated items are not valid if they are translated, meaning the items wouldn't be understood by the respondents in a way similar to the questionnaire maker's one (Griffiee, 2012, p.144).

### **3.3 Procedures**

Since data gathered under conditions of boredom, fatigue, or annoyance become unreliable data (Griffiee, 2012, p.142), the questionnaire was administered with the following environmental conditions: the teachers could answer the questions at home or work or at any place they found it more comfortable. Also, they could choose the time of the day to deal with it.

Dornyei (2003) concluded that the maximum questionnaire length should have been three to four pages, taking no longer than 30 minutes to answer (Griffiee, 2012, p.142). A modern design and the use of technology allowed to creation of a questionnaire that took approximately 15 minutes to complete.



## 4 Findings

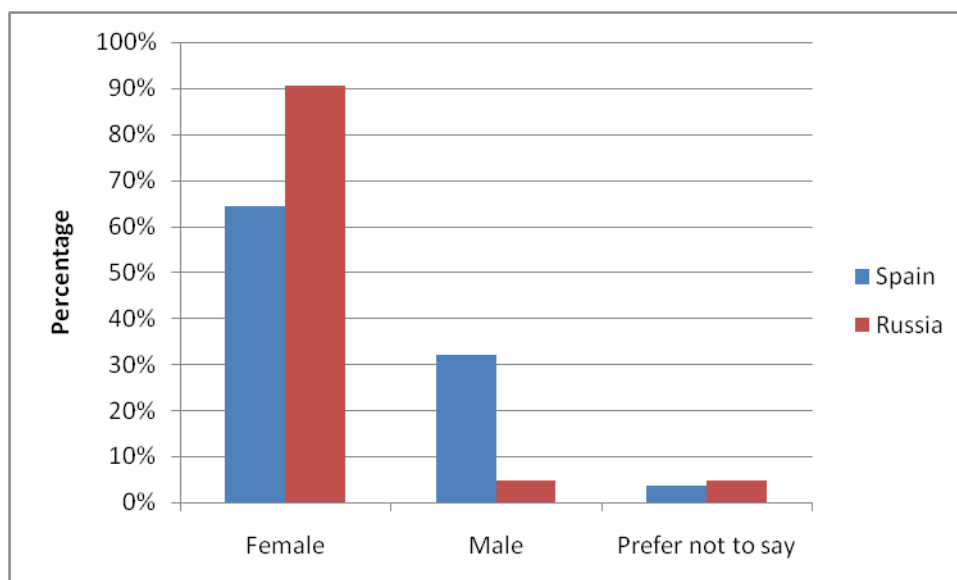
The analysis was based on data collected by the questionnaire. All the data were divided into three groups: demographic data, data from closed-ended items, and data from open-ended items.

### 4.1 Demographic data

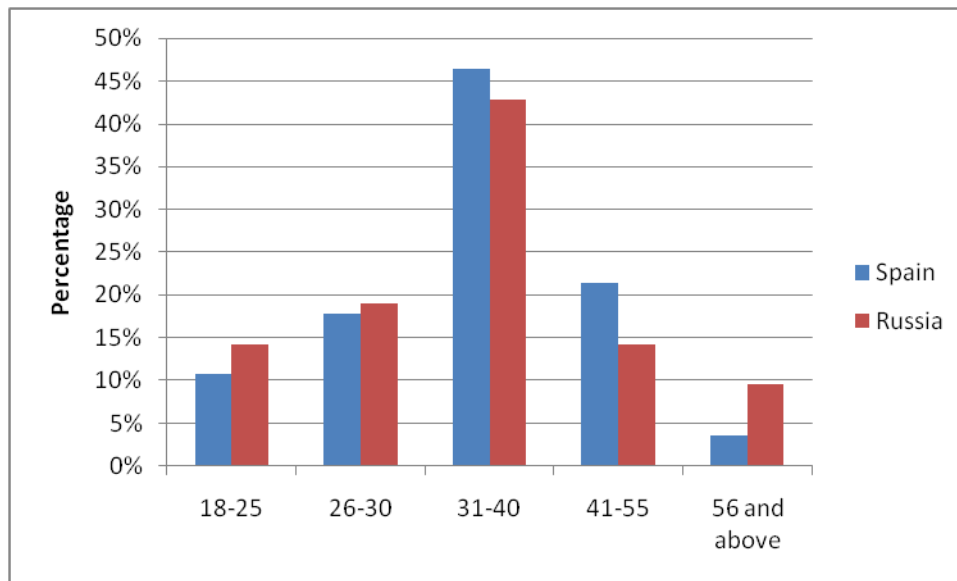
Demographic data consisted of the following biographical information: gender, first language, nationality, and so on.

Among respondents in Russia, 19 teachers (90.5%) were female, 1 male teacher (4.8%) and one preferred not to name the gender (4.8%). Different age groups were represented among participants: starting with 18 years old and finishing with 56 and above. The biggest age group represented was 31- 40 year-olds (42.9%).

As per the population in Spain, 18 teachers (64.3%) were female, 9 were male teachers (32.1%) and 1 person preferred “not to say” (3.6%). The majority of teachers were from the same age category as in Russia: 31 to 40 years old (46.4%).



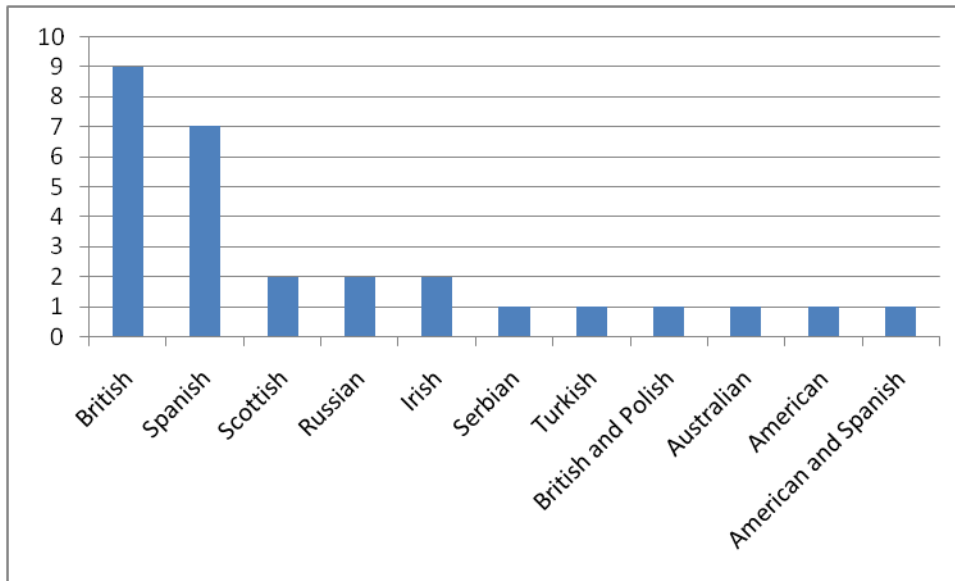
**Graph 1 Gender information from participants**



**Graph 2 Age information from participants**

In Russia, all respondents were Russian with Russian as a native language. Only one teacher out of 21 had the experience of living in an English-speaking country (the USA) working there for more than 3 months.

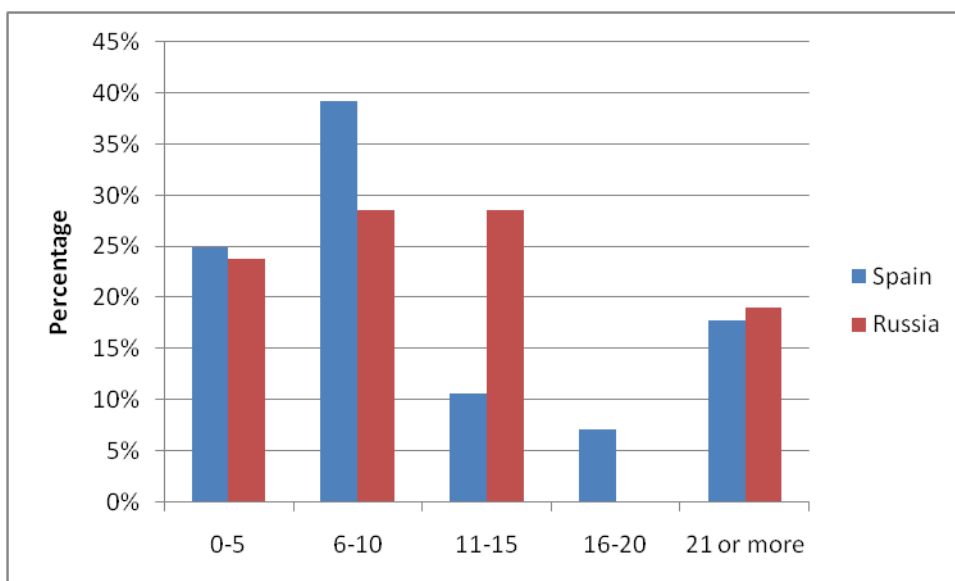
Unlike the results obtained in Russia, in Spain there was a multinational variety of teachers represented by both native and non-native speakers of English: Spanish (7 persons), Australian (1), British (9), British and Polish (1), Irish (2), Russian (2), Scottish (2), Serbian (1), Turkish (1), American (1), American and Spanish (1) with native languages such as Catalan, Spanish, English, Scottish, Russian, Serbian and Turkish.



**Graph 3 Nationality of respondents (Spain)**

Only 35.7% of respondents were not native English speakers. Almost all of the teachers (8 out of 10) whose native language was not English, had lived in English-speaking countries such as the USA, the UK, Australia for more than 3 months pursuing various goals: education, work, and others (not specified).

In Russia there was an equal distribution in full years of teaching experience: for 0-5 years (23.8%), 6-10 years - 28.6%, 11-15 - 28.6% years accordingly; and 19% for 21 years and more. All of them teaching not only 3-6 year-olds but also other ages.

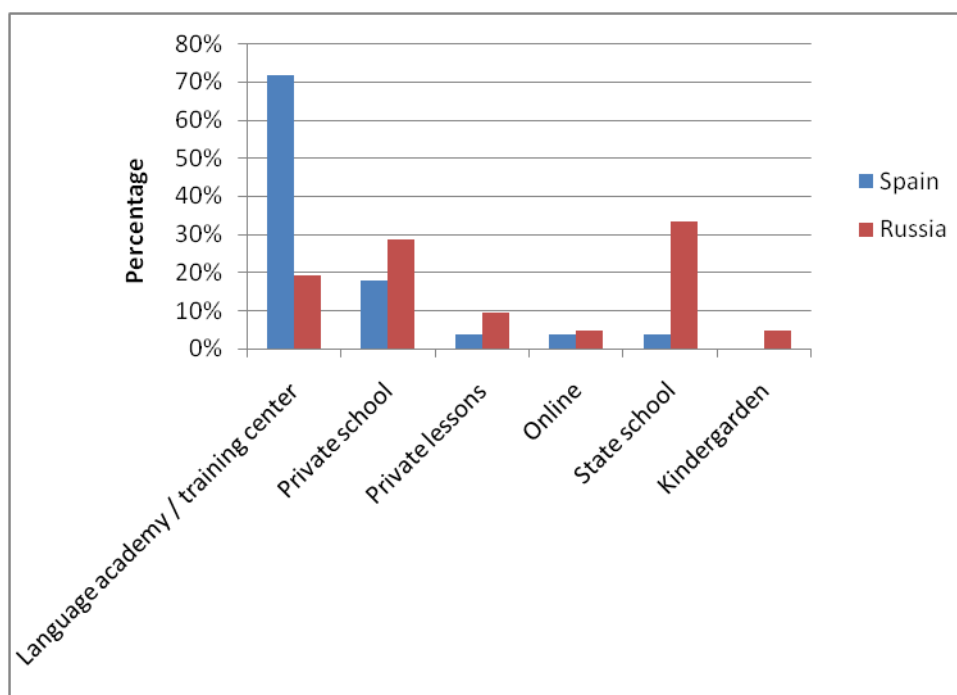


**Graph 4 Respondents' teaching experience, full years**

In Spain the teaching experience of the units of analysis ascending started from 16-20 years (7.1%), then 11-15 years (10.7%), next 21 or more (17.9%), afterwards 0-5 (25%), and finished with 6-10 (39.3%). Some of the teachers (14.3%) taught 3-6-year-old children only, which was different from the Russian experience where none of the teachers who participated in the questionnaire only taught very young learners.

One more difference between the responses that were drawn in Spain and Russia was the number of teachers teaching at state schools. 33.3% of participants in Russia taught at state schools (while in Spain it was only 3.6%); 28.6% - at private schools; 19% - at language academies or training centers; the rest of the participants worked at kindergartens (4.8%), online schools (4.8%) or provided private lessons (9.6% ).

In Spain, the participants taught mostly in language academies or training centers (71.4%). One of the reasons for this could be the fact that there were a lot of native speakers and people of different nationalities teaching in Spain.

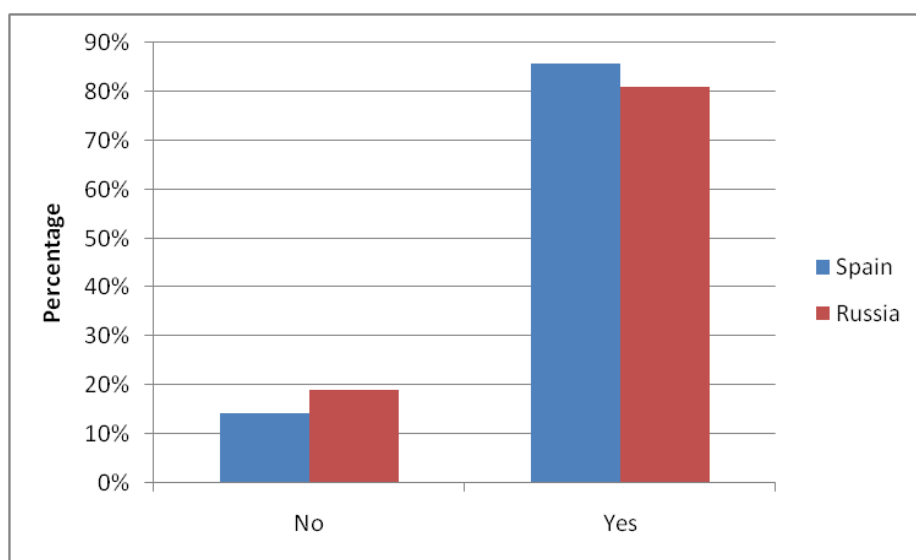


**Graph 5 Type of school the respondents teach in most often**

A formal qualification in teaching English as a foreign language was held by most respondents (81%) in Russia. All the rest (19%) did not have the qualification connected with teaching or pedagogy but were qualified in other fields, for example, culture studies, law, science. Only 4 of the units of analysis had no higher education.

In Spain the number of teachers who had a formal qualification in teaching English as a foreign language was similar to the number demonstrated by Russian respondents: 85.7% and 14.3% having a degree in social sciences, chemical studies, arts, philosophy of film, geography, business, tourism fields, etc.

Totally, 6 units of analysis did not receive higher education.



**Graph 6 The number of respondents with a formal qualification in teaching English as a foreign language**

While 14 of respondents in Russia considered their qualifications were enough to work with very young learners (3 - 6 years old) due to different reasons: having enough knowledge of the age group and experience of working with it, having the necessary educational background, and having students' good results; 7 of the teachers believe the opposite. The reasons they provided were the following: a focus on teaching English to older students during their studies at university, not having enough

experience, a necessity for further training and obtaining special knowledge (for instance, of special psychological features or techniques).

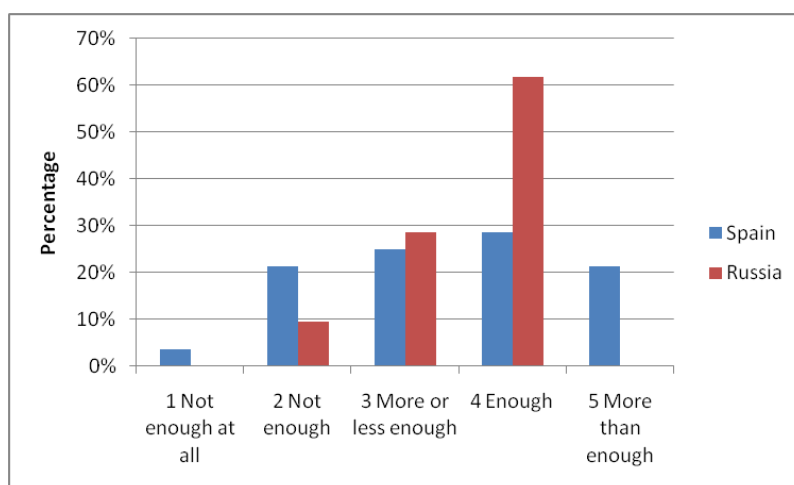
In Spain there was an equal distribution in teachers' beliefs regarding the education they received: almost half of the respondents (13) believed the education they obtained was not enough to teach very young learners (3 - 6 years old); another half (13 people) believed their education was enough. 1 respondent stated that it was enough only with experience obtained later and another respondent mentioned not feeling 100% confident when teaching young learners.

The reasons for their opinions varied: some thought that "job learning, training, and practical experience", special knowledge (like pedagogical, children development, behavior, and psychology) were essential to succeed in teaching very young learners, others add that most of the qualifications aimed at older ages, "in general, TEFL courses aren't geared towards teaching young learners"; still others mentioned very young learners were "an extremely difficult age range".

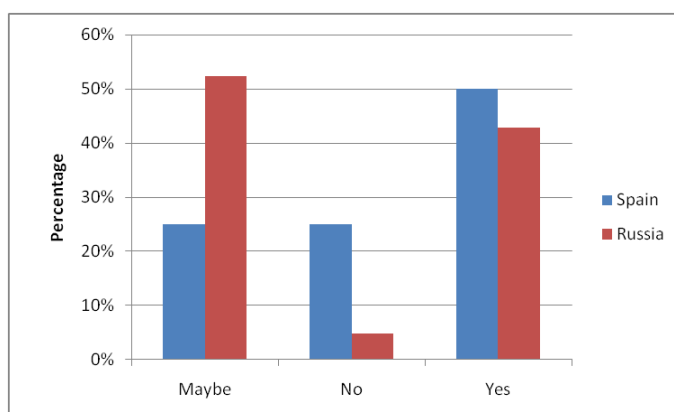
19 of the questioned teachers in Russia think they have enough pedagogical skills (an understanding of the principles of child development along with pedagogy principles) to teach very young learners and only 2 did not think so. As a result, only 42.9% of them answered positively to the question if they would like to get training on developing pedagogical skills to teach very young learners (3 - 6 years old), 4.8% responded negatively and most of them were not sure (52.4%).

In Spain 7 of the respondents believed they did not have enough pedagogical skills to teach very young learners and 14 of them were sure they did have them, while 7 were not so sure and answered the question as "more or less enough". Yet, most of the respondents (50%) would like to get special training and develop their pedagogical

skills to teach very young learners, only 25% of them would not like to have it and 25% were not so sure (they chose the option “Maybe”).



**Graph 7 Teachers’ beliefs about having enough pedagogical skills**



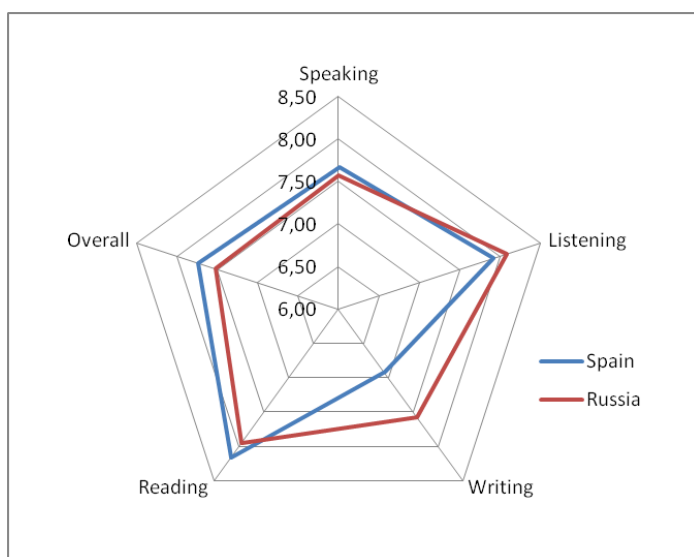
**Graph 8 Teachers’ ideas about getting training on developing pedagogical skills**

In general, teachers in Russia assessed their English proficiency level using a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1= not at all proficient; 10 = totally proficient). The highest assessment was the following: 9 points for speaking (6 respondents); 9 points for listening (6 respondents); 9 points for writing (7 respondents) and 9 points for reading (6 respondents). The lowest number of points chosen were 3 for speaking (2 people); 3 for listening (1 person); 2 for writing (1 person) and 4 for reading (2 people). Only one person chose the maximum number of points (10) for all the categories. At the same

time, the answers showed that the lowest overall level the teachers believed they had was 3 points out of 10 (2 respondents), and the highest overall level was 10 (1 respondent only).

As per respondents in Spain, since it was difficult to measure the proficiency level of English for native speakers (they usually do not have any international exams like IELTS, etc. to check their level), a researcher decided to provide a separate column for them (“Native”), just to state English as their native language. All the rest could assess their English proficiency level using a scale from 1 to 10. The lowest assessment was 3 for speaking (1 respondent), 3 for listening (1 respondent), 2 for writing (1 respondent) and 4 for reading (2 respondents) with the lowest overall rating of 3 (1 person). The highest assessment was 10 for speaking (2 respondents), 10 for listening (3 respondents), 10 for writing (1 respondent), 10 for reading (6 respondents), and overall of 10 was chosen by 2 respondents.

Then, the mean of the score for all skills and overall was calculated (see graph 9).



**Graph 9 Teachers’ assessment of their English proficiency level in Russia and Spain (average score)**

As it could be observed in the Radar graph, that the self-evaluation score for reading, listening, speaking and overall was very similar in both countries. The



exception was how teachers assessed their writing skills: Russian teachers felt more confident at this skill and chose higher scores on average.

Comparing the results gained about English teachers of very young learners in Spain and Russia, we could reach several conclusions.

First, most of the teachers in Russia teaching this age group (and teachers in general) were female unlike the situation in Spain. One of the reasons for that could have been the problem of low salaries for teachers in Russia, as Davis (2019) stated it “Teaching is not a well-paid job in Russia”, and the prejudice that still existed in Russian society that it was not so prestigious for a man to work as a school teacher (studies showed that these careers tend to enjoy less prestige as well in some other countries (Rich, 2014).

Gender was among several factors that were found to influence teaching styles (El-Emadi et al., 2019). Gender-related beliefs influenced teachers’ behaviour in such areas as their estimation of verbal and written achievements, their expectations of students, and teacher-student interaction (Kraker-Pauw et al., 2016, p.1). Also, the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and students’ performance was found to be different for male and female teachers (Thronsen, Are Turmo, 2012, p.159). Thus, it might have influenced the teachers’ beliefs about different areas of teaching very young learners, though this idea needs further investigation and research.

Secondly, the results of the questionnaire proved the ideas about the predominance of non-native English teaching in Russia expressed by Abramova et al. (2013): all respondents were Russian compared to Spain where more than a half of respondents (64.3% ) were native English speakers.

Also, Russian “lagging behind” the global linguistic unification process was obvious with almost all English teachers never having experienced living in an English-

speaking country for more than three months (20 out of 21 teachers). While in Spain only 2 out of 10 non-native English-speaking teachers had never lived in English-speaking countries.

The difference in data could be explained by the reasons mentioned above such as the low salary of Russian teachers that did not allow them to travel abroad for a long time or get education overseas; the differences between the Russian higher education system and the education system in Europe that existed till recent times: Russia became a full-fledged member of the Bologna Process in 2003 only (Kortunov, 2019).

Also, the fact that only a minority of Russians spoke English as a second language and, again, low salaries for English teachers, especially in cities smaller than Moscow and Saint-Petersburg, as well as the distances in Russia (not like in Europe where a teacher could work in Spain, for example, and visit his family in England during the weekends), made a barrier for native speakers to work in Russia. Although, as it was mentioned by Johnson (2020), the situation was changing, but slowly.

Thirdly, teachers in Russia, as the questionnaire showed, did not teach just very young learners while in Spain there were respondents whose target teaching audience was 3-6-year-old children at most. This could be explained by the fact that private schools and international schools were still uncommon in Russia (Russian Schools. Structure of system, ages of entry and certificates, 2021).

The majority of teachers in Russia believed their qualifications were enough to work with very young learners (3 - 6 years old) while half of the teachers in Spain did not think so. Teachers from both countries mentioned the necessity of having experience (not just education itself), further training, and gaining knowledge of children's development, behavior, psychology and learning all necessary teaching techniques to be able to teach this age group.

Another point was that most of the teachers in Russia believed also that they had enough pedagogical skills to teach very young learners. In contrast, half of the teachers in Spain were not so sure or thought they did not have enough of them. In other words, teachers in Russia felt more confident in their skills than teachers in Spain.

Finally, the proficiency level of English the teachers believed they had, varied greatly in terms of option “totally proficient”: the maximum number of points in Russia was chosen by 1 teacher only. When it came to the lower proficiency levels, the results for Russian and Spanish teachers coincided. However, Russian teachers seemed to feel more confident about their writing skills.

## **4.2 Closed-ended items data**

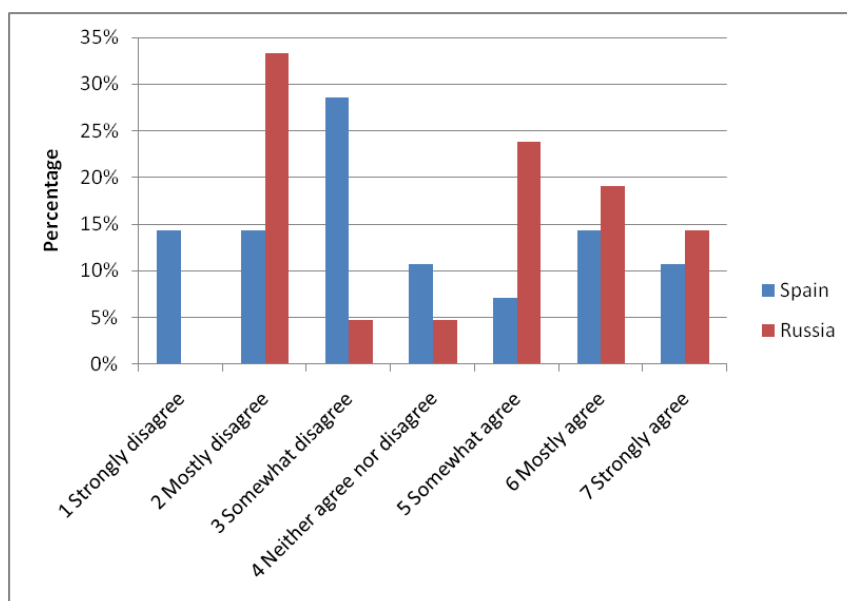
Data from closed-ended items were drawn from a scale that quantified the data. There were the following types of data: frequency (how often), ordinal (ranking), and continuous (from Likert scales on a one-to-seven scale). Numerical data were analyzed statistically to show trends or patterns including simple percentages.

All the data were structured in different sections with a focus on the 3 topics of the project.

### **4.2.1 Using L1 during the lesson**

The respondents in Russia had different opinions regarding the appropriateness of using L1 in class. The most popular option chosen was 2 “Mostly disagree” (33%). Although, since there were a lot of respondents who chose “agree” options (“Somewhat agree”, “Mostly agree”, “Strongly agree”), the average opinion was slightly moved to the “agree” (4.3). However, it was observed that almost nobody (except 1 individual) chose to answer 4 (“Neither agree nor disagree”) while most of the respondents supported the opposite opinion.

Therefore, respondents in Russia tend to believe that L1 should be used in the English classroom when teaching young learners while their colleagues in Spain were not so sure. The most popular option chosen was 3 “Somewhat disagree” (28%). However, the average opinion was slightly moved to the “Neither agree nor disagree” (3.7) because there were a lot of respondents who chose “agree” (“Somewhat agree”, “Mostly agree”, “Strongly agree”) and “disagree” options (“Strongly disagree”, “Mostly disagree”).

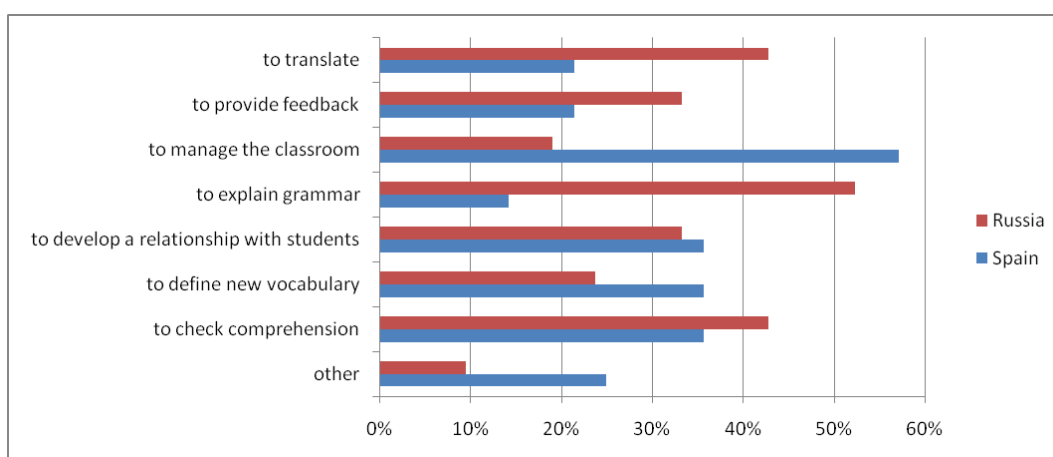


**Graph 10 Teachers who agree or disagree with the following statement: "A native language (L1) should be used in the English classroom when teaching young learners"**

It could be caused by the reason that in Spain a lot of teachers were native speakers of English who might not speak students' L1 and simply had no choice aside from using English all the time or they supported the methodology when teachers use English exclusively during the lesson (or were encouraged by their educational institution to do so). It was worth mentioning that immersion (more details would be provided in the 4.3 Open-ended items data) as an effective teaching method for very young learners had been mentioned only by Spanish respondents, meaning it was not so popular and widespread in Russia yet.

The reasons why teachers in Russia believed it was appropriate to use L1 during the class varied. The most popular reason was “to explain grammar” (52.4%), the less popular was “while explaining some basic safety rules in the beginning” (4.8%). All options provided in the questionnaire were chosen meaning teachers use L1 for more or less the same purposes.

The most popular reasons for using a native language in class in Spain were “to manage the classroom” (57.1%), “to define new vocabulary”, “to develop a relationship with students” and “to check comprehension” (35.7% each). Among other reasons for using L1 named by respondents in Spain, there were maintaining a conversation and getting the children to use to the pronunciation, when “other methods have not worked”, “when a child is unwell or endangered”, in emergency situations.

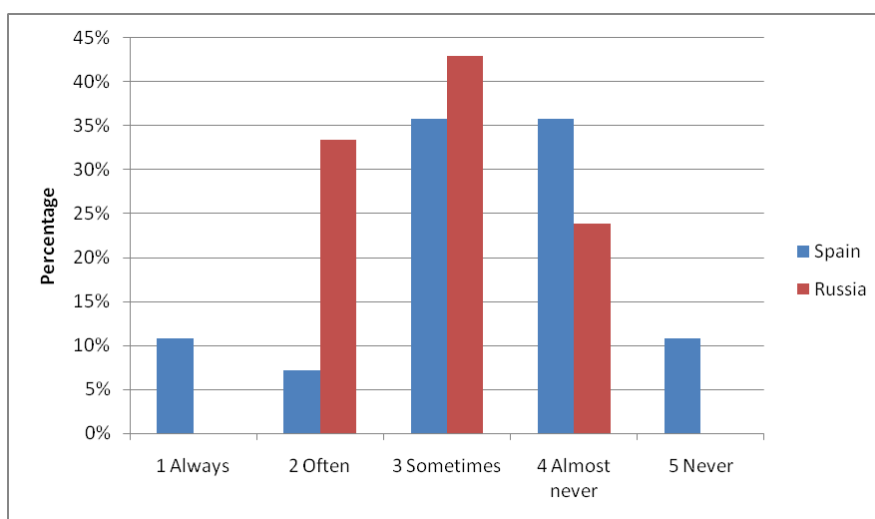


**Graph 11 Teachers’ beliefs about the appropriateness of using a native language (L1) in class with very young learners**

43% of the teachers in Russia admitted that they sometimes used L1 in class, while 33% did it “often” and 24% - “almost never”, meaning all of the respondents used a native language in class at least occasionally.

In Spain, 36% of the teachers claimed that they sometimes used L1 in class, while 36% of them did it “almost never” did it.

Thus, teachers in both countries did use a native language during their lessons but the reasons why they did so varied.

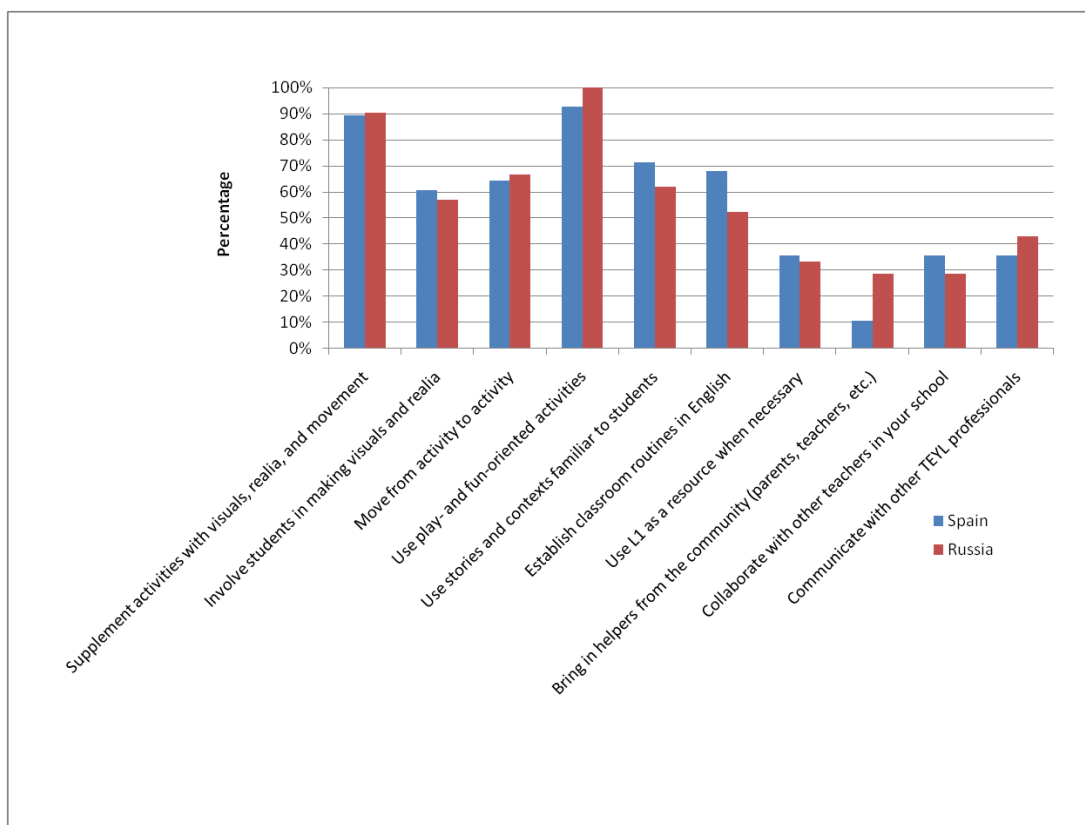


**Graph 12 The frequency of using a native language (L1) in the English classroom with very young learners**

#### 4.2.2 Teaching practices

Teachers in Russia found the following practices to teach very young learners the most useful: using play and fun-oriented activities (100% of respondents) and supplementing activities with visuals, realia, and movement (90.5%).

In Spain teachers found absolutely the same practices to teach very young learners the most useful as the teachers in Russia did: using play and fun-oriented activities (92.9% of respondents) and supplementing activities with visuals, realia, and movement (89.3%).

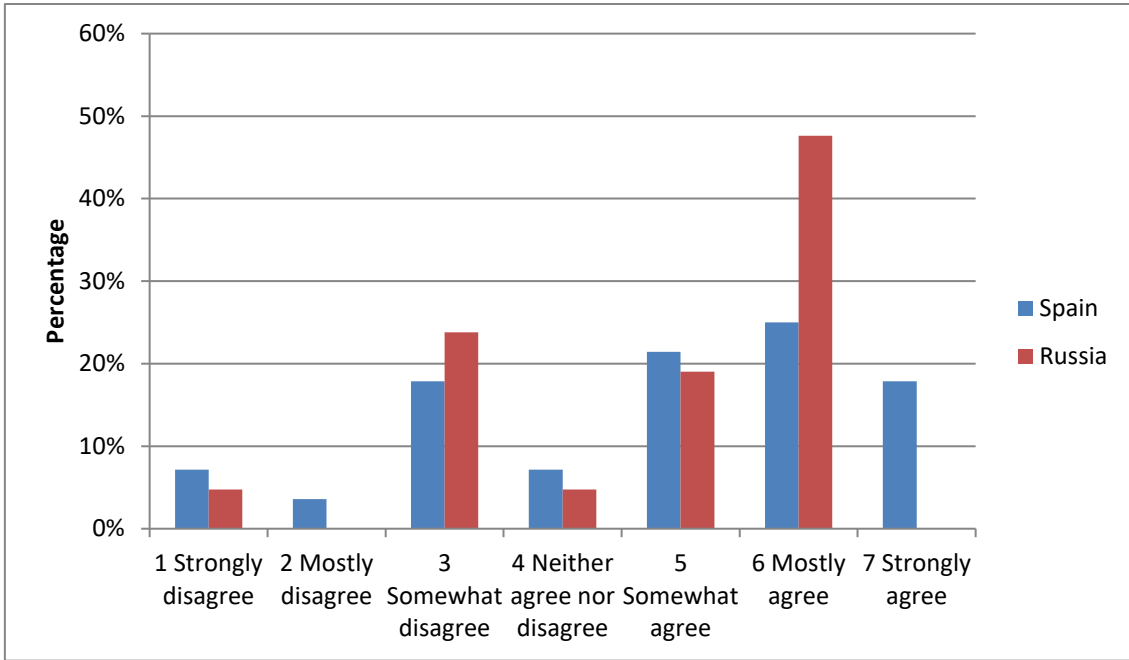


**Graph 13 The most useful recommendations about practices to teach very young learners**

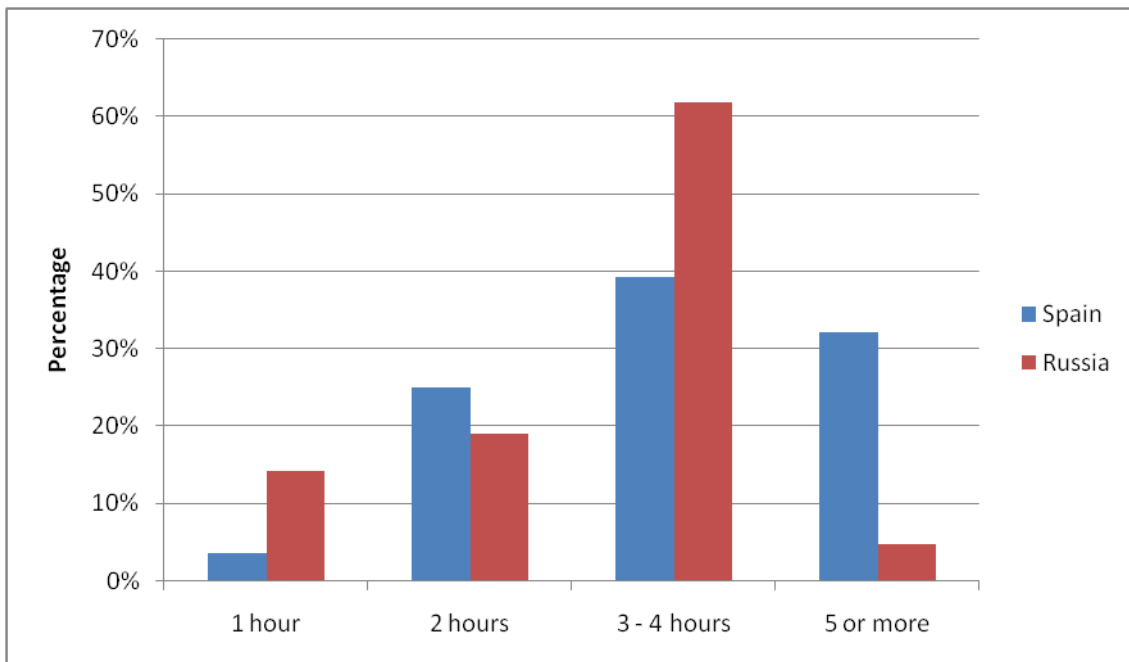
### 4.2.3 Teaching materials

As per having enough of the suitable materials to teach very young learners, the most popular option chosen (mode) in Russia was 6 “Mostly agree” (48%) and the mean was moved to the “agree” (4.8). However, it was observed that almost nobody (except 1 individual) chose to answer 4 (“Neither agree nor disagree”).

The most popular option chosen by respondents in Spain was the same as chosen by Russian respondents: 6 “Mostly agree” (25%) and the mean was also moved to the “agree” (4.8). Again, not a lot of respondents (2) chose to answer 4 (“Neither agree nor disagree”).



**Graph 14 Having enough suitable materials including the textbooks to teach very young learners**



**Graph 15 The ideal number of hours per week dedicated to English for very young learners at educational institutions**



#### 4.2.4 A number of English lessons per week

In Russia, most of the respondents (61.9%) believed the number of hours dedicated to English at educational institutions per week should be 3 - 4 (see the graph above). In actual fact, most of them (11 respondents) taught mostly only 2 hours (the table below).

One respondent did not specify the number of hours per week saying only that he/she teachers “every day”, so it was difficult to count that answer.

<b>Number of hours</b>	0.5	1	1.5	2	2.5	3	4
<b>Number of respondents</b>	1	3	1	11	1	1	2

**Table 1 The real number of hours dedicated to English very young learners have at the educational institution (in Russia)**

Most of the respondents (39.3%) in Spain believed the time dedicated to English at educational institutions should also be 3 - 4 hours per week. While in reality, they taught mostly only 1 (6 respondents) or 2 hours per week (8 respondents).

1 respondent provided not a clear answer stating “60% of the time”, another one did not specify the number of hours.

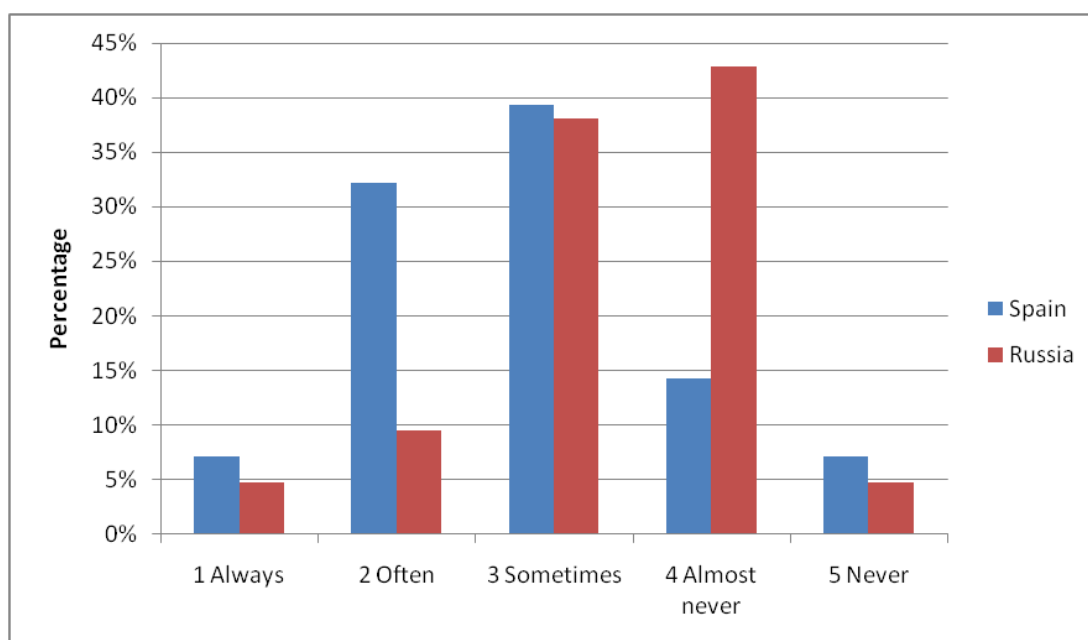
<b>Number of hours</b>	1	1 or 2	1.5	2	3	3.5	5	30	40
<b>Number of respondents</b>	6	3	3	8	2	1	1	1	1

**Table 2 The real number of hours dedicated to English very young learners have at the educational institution (in Spain)**

The fact that teachers in both countries teach fewer hours per week than they believed they should have done, could be stated as the divergence between the practice and the ideal situation and could prove that teachers in Russia and Spain face the same challenge as teachers all around the world: not enough hours of English at school (Garton et al., 2011 ).

#### 4.2.5 Completing the syllabus

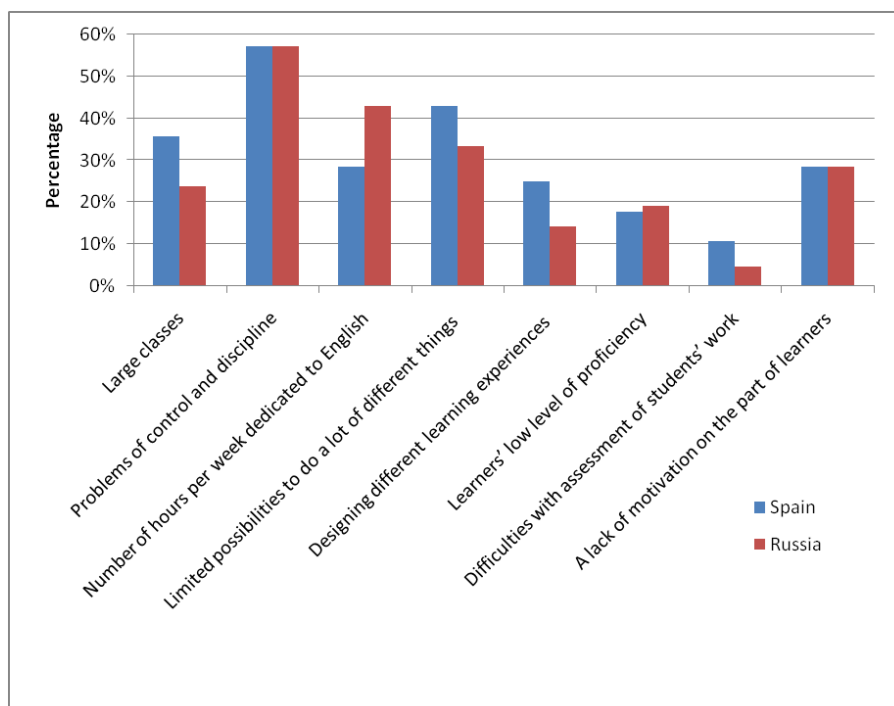
Another challenge that teachers around the world faced was completing the syllabus. As the results show, this problem was also common for the teachers in Spain.



**Graph 16 The frequency of feeling under pressure to complete the syllabus**

As it could be observed from the graph, most of the respondents in Russia did not feel under pressure to complete the syllabus: 9 teachers out of 21 chose the “Almost never” option. The second most common answer was “Sometimes” (8 teachers) and only 3 respondents feel pressure “always” or “often”.

Most of the respondents in Spain, unlike in Russia, felt under pressure to complete the syllabus: 9 teachers out of 21 chose the “often” option and 11 respondents chose the “sometimes” option.



**Graph 17 The problems connected with the classroom context and learners teachers usually face when teaching very young learners**

#### 4.2.6 Other challenges

As per the difficulties connected with the classroom context and learners, the teachers in Russia usually faced the problems of control and discipline (57.1%) and the number of hours per week dedicated to English (42.9%). The problems that the teachers in Spain had, were problems of control and discipline (57.1%) too, and limited possibilities to do a lot of different things in class (42.9%). Thus, some of the challenges were common for both countries while some predominated in Russia or Spain. However, the results of the questionnaire proved the idea expressed earlier that Russian and Spanish teachers faced some of the challenges that teachers from other countries did.

### 4.3 Open-ended items data

Qualitative data were received from open-ended items. The data were compiled and summarized according to McKay's (2006) five-step process (as cited in Griffiee, 2012, p.152):

1. the data were transcribed into a document for easy manipulation;
2. the data were grouped into three groups named current beliefs of English teachers to very young learners about a) the best methodology to teach very young learners, b) the use of L1 in the classroom; c) the main challenges they find when teaching very young learners;
3. the data were read looking for key ideas;
4. "reoccurring themes" were identified to summarize the data;

for each theme, a response that exemplifies the theme was selected.

#### Creating materials to teach very young learners

In Russia, most respondents created materials to teach very young learners and spent from 1 to 5 hours per week on this (see table 3). Only one of the respondents said he/she did not create them because "Everything is in class books and activity books".

<b>Number of hours</b>	1	1-2	2	2-3	2-4	3	3-4	3-5	5
<b>Number of respondents</b>	3	2	3	1	1	1	4	2	3

**Table 3 Number of hours per week dedicated to material creation by Russian teachers**

Most of the respondents in Spain created teaching materials for very young learners and spent on this from 10-15 minutes (1 respondent) minimum to 3 hours (2 respondents) maximum (see the table below).

<b>Number of hours</b>	0.17-0.25	0.33	1	1-2	2	2-3	3
<b>Number of respondents</b>	1	1	3	4	4	1	2

**Table 4 Number of hours per week dedicated to material creation by Spanish teachers**

4 of the teachers in Spain did not prepare any materials at all and 1 did not “prepare much”. While another teacher did not clarify the number of hours she/he usually dedicated to the material creation but admitted that it was “many” hours.

As the answers demonstrated the problem raised by Mathew, Pani (as cited Al-Ali & Mann, 2019) and Copland, et al. (2013) of not having enough teaching materials and consequently the necessity to create the materials by teachers existed in both countries.

#### **4.3.1 Level of proficiency and fluency teachers need in order to teach very young learners**

In Russia, the respondents had different opinions regarding the level of proficiency and fluency teachers needed in order to teach very young learners: from A2 to C1 (see table 5). Some believed they needed “high level” (without specifying what they meant by that) to combine “teaching and communication with little children”. For others, “the quality of interaction” was much more important than “language proficiency”, still others believed teachers should “have a large vocabulary” and “a university degree”. For one of the respondents, it was difficult to answer the question.

<b>Level of proficiency and fluency</b>	A2 - B1	B1	B2	B2-C2	B or C	C1	High level
<b>Number of respondents</b>	2	5	2	1	1	2	4

**Table 5 Level of proficiency and fluency teachers need in order to teach very young learners claimed by respondents in Russia**

In Spain, 2 respondents believed that the level should be “as high as possible in all areas” because a “language needs to be fluent in order [for a teacher] to be spontaneous in class”, as one more respondent stated it “very high” level. However, other teachers had an opposite opinion: “Complete fluency is not necessary” but “a good grasp and understanding are required”; “Not a high level, although...an accent and the use of English are very important”. One respondent claimed that a teacher should be “proficient enough to help learners progress”.

2 teachers thought the level of English was less important than the teaching skills and methodology.

<b>Level of proficiency and fluency</b>	A2	B1	B2	B2-C1	C1	C1-C2	C2	Native
<b>Number of respondents</b>	1	1	3	2	6	1	2	1

**Table 6 Level of proficiency and fluency teachers need in order to teach very young learners claimed by respondents in Spain**

Hence, teachers in both countries highlighted that not only the level of language proficiency and fluency was important but also the skills the teacher had. It was also remarkable that no one in Russia thought that teachers of very young learners should have been native speakers of English. It could be connected with a fact mentioned earlier in this work that non-native English teaching predominated in Russia.

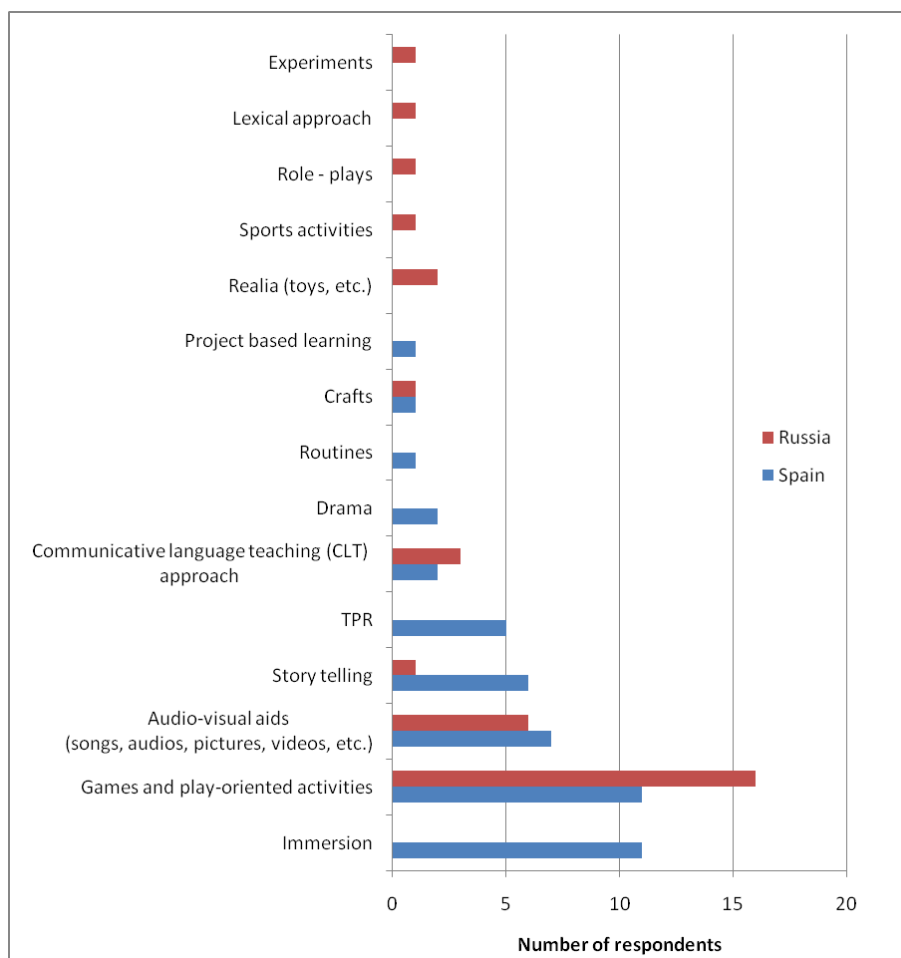
#### **4.3.2 The most effective method to teach English to very young learners**

The majority of the teachers in Russia (16 respondents) believed that the most effective method to teach young learners was play-based learning which included games, play-oriented and fun-oriented activities (see graph 18). Such methods as using audio-visual aids like songs, audios, pictures, videos, etc. (6 respondents), realia like toys, etc.(2 respondents), storytelling method (1 respondent), crafts (1 respondent),

experiments (1 respondent) and sports activities (1 respondent) were brought up as well. Immersion unlike the situation in Spain was not mentioned at all.

2 of the respondents also mentioned that revision, consistency and changing different activities all the time was the key to success in teaching young learners. One teacher stated the lexical approach being effective.

For 3 respondents in Spain it was difficult to choose only one method, they preferred “not a single method, but a combination based on the need and learning preferences”. Their opinion coincided with the opinion of many teachers from other countries who believed that young learners needed an experiential approach (Moon, 2005) that included a mixture of characteristics of other approaches: activity-based, contextualized; focused on communication, play and fun-oriented, etc.



**Graph 18 The most effective method to teach English to very young learners in teachers' opinion**

In Spain, teachers thought they needed to create an environment that made learners learn without realizing, “one where they are active, engaged and absorbing the language”, so immersion, games and play-oriented activities were chosen as the most effective methods to teach English to very young learners by 22 respondents (see graph 18). Then followed in descending order: audio-visual aids (7 respondents), story-telling (6 respondents), TPR (5 respondents), drama (2 respondents), CLT (2 respondents), project-based learning (1 respondent) and crafts (1 respondent).

The perfect lessons for teachers were “fun” when students “interact and move a lot”. As one of the teachers stated that: “A little bit of silliness goes a long way too!”



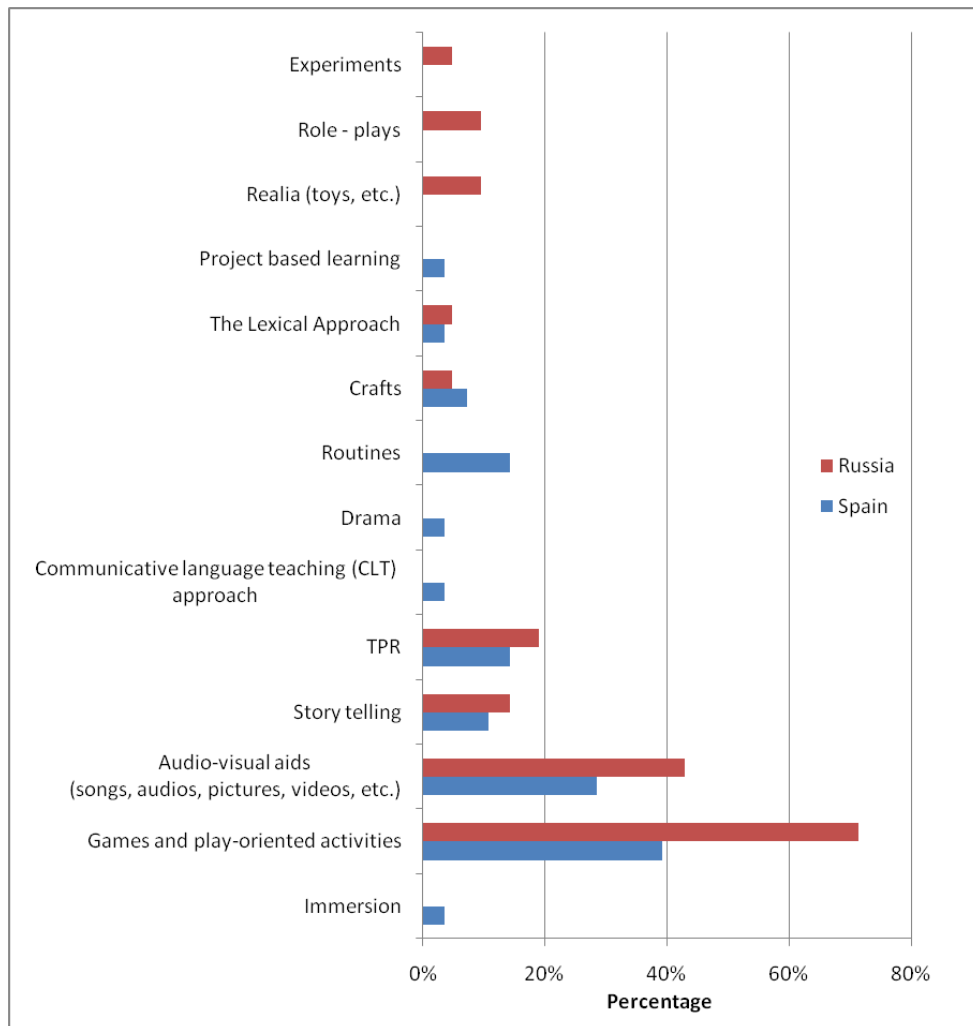
The CLT approach despite its popularity around the world was named as the most effective way to teach this group age by only 3 teachers in Russia and 2 - in Spain. Though, this approach represented a broad term that could include some of the methods mentioned by other teachers as a different method of teaching (for example, sports or craft activities).

Therefore, play-based learning, as it could be expected, was claimed by the majority of teachers in both countries as the most effective. Here their views coincided with such researchers as Mourão (2015), Putro et al. (n.d.), Dewar (2008-2014), Whitebread (2012), Vygotsky (1966), and others.

#### **4.3.3 Methods/practices teachers usually use to teach very young learners**

The methods and practices usually used by respondents in Russia were the following: games and play-oriented activities (15 respondents), audio-visual aids (9 respondents), TPR (4 respondents), story-telling (3 respondents), realia (2 respondents), crafts (1 respondent), role-plays (2 respondents), lexical approach (1 respondent), crafts (1 respondent) and the experiments (1 respondent).

The methods mentioned by respondents in Spain were: immersion (1 respondent), routines (4 respondents), games and play-oriented activities (11 respondents), TPR (4 respondents), story-telling (3 respondents), audio-visual aids (8 respondents), crafts (2 respondents), drama (1 respondent), CLT (1 respondent), project-based learning (1 respondent) and the lexical approach (1 respondent).



**Graph 19 The method/practices teachers usually use to teach very young learners**

There was some inconsistency in respondents' beliefs about the best method to use and the methods they claimed they usually use to teach very young learners. For example, CLT and sports activities were not mentioned at all. Though, in general, the teachers tended to use the same methods they believed were the most effective (see table 7).

Methods	Number of respondents	
	that think it is the most effective method to teach English to VYL	that usually use to teach VYL
Games and play-oriented activities	16	15
Audio-visual aids (songs, audios, pictures, videos, etc.)	6	9
CLT approach	3	0
TPR	0	4
Story telling	1	3
Realia (toys, etc.)	2	2
Role - plays	1	2
Sports activities	1	0
Lexical approach	1	1
Crafts	1	1
Experiments	1	1

**Table 7 The comparison table between the methods/practices teachers believe are the most effective to teach very young learners and the methods they usually use (Russia)**

One of the teachers in Russia highlighted Valeria Mescheryakova's methodology "I love English" which, in the teacher's opinion, was suitable for teaching very young learners and which this teacher used during the lessons. Some of the teachers tried to create an atmosphere of creative learning by reciting poems, writing letters, singing songs and drawing during the class.

Teachers in Spain emphasized the importance of short input sessions and activities, making students move around and interact as effective practices to use when working with very young learners.

Activities should be fun and the methodology should be “open and dynamic”, for instance, children learning English through termly projects based around a story or a movie. Teachers believed that in this way, students were “motivated to learn in a natural and personal way”.

British national curriculum, forest school program, using grammar to create conversations and exercises to consolidate knowledge were also distinguished as methods used. One of the respondents had his/her own method even but he/she did not provide any details about the method.

Some of the teachers struggled to name only one method because they preferred a combination of different methods and practices. Again, the idea of an experimental, mixed approach appeared.

As per the teachers’ beliefs about the best method to use and the methods they claimed to use in reality, there was some inconsistency as well. As it could be seen from table 8, in Spain there was a big gap between the teachers’ beliefs and the actual practice in using the immersion method: even if immersion was one of the methods most named to be effective (11 respondents out of 28), only one person actually used it. Routines as a method, on the contrary, was used quite often, even if most of the teachers did not believe in its effectiveness (4 respondents vs. 1 respondent).

Methods	Number of respondents	
	that think it is the most effective method to teach English to VYL	that usually use to teach VYL
Immersion	11	1
Games and play-oriented activities	11	11
Audio-visual aids (songs, audios, pictures, videos, etc.)	7	8
Story telling	6	3
TPR	5	4
CLT approach	2	1
Drama	2	1
Routines	1	4
Project based learning	1	1
Crafts	1	2
Lexical approach	0	1

**Table 8 The comparison table between the methods/practices teachers believe are the most effective to teach very young learners and the methods they usually use (Spain)**

However, as a whole, the teachers claimed to use the same methods they believed the most effective to be.

In both countries, a lot of respondents provided the following reply to the question about the methods and practices they usually used: “as above” or “as in question 28”, meaning the answers for both questions were the same (beliefs about the best method to use and the methods they claimed they usually used). Generally, their beliefs about two areas (the most effective method to teach English to very young learners and the method/practices teachers usually use to teach very young learners) were the same. Games and play-oriented activities remained the most common method the teachers used in both countries.

#### **4.3.4 Aspect(s) of teachers' job they find the most challenging**

A lot of aspects of teachers' jobs when working with very young learners were found challenging in both countries.

In Russia, teachers found challenging the following (see graph 20): discipline (6 respondents), learners' lack of attention (4 respondents), providing feedback (1 respondent), young learners' motivation (4 respondents), communication with children (2 respondents), creating interesting activities (1 respondent), the difference between the levels of students in the same class (1 respondent), paperwork (1 respondent) and finding an individual approach to every student (1 respondent).

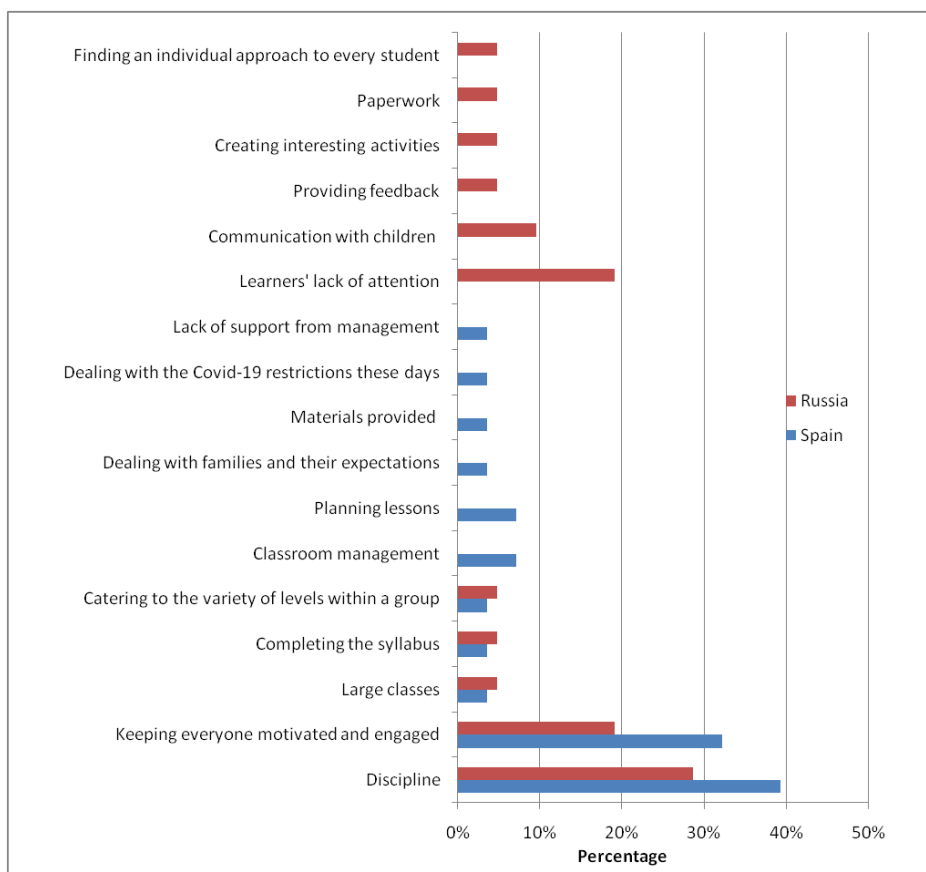
Also, such difficulties as the need to strike a balance in interaction with children, parents and colleagues, the lack of support on the part of the authorities, the price of the student's books were mentioned.

For some teachers playing the games and a high level of students' energy was already a challenge.

In Spain discipline (11 respondents), classroom management (2 respondents) and motivation of students (9 respondents) were also the common challenges for the teachers. Besides, one of the respondents claimed a lack of support from management, another one - dealing with families and their expectations, still, others talked about dealing with the Covid-19 restrictions these days ("not sharing, not touching, cleaning all the time, keeping distance", etc.). For some teachers knowing they were making a difference and a lack of energy, creativity and imagination to work with very young learners was challenging.

In addition, some of the teachers stated that catering to the variety of levels within a group (1 respondent) and planning lessons (1 respondent) were challenging for them.

Teachers also mentioned that the existing materials were not fun for students and they would like to do more preparation work but it was unpaid and they already “do a lot”.



**Graph 20 Aspect(s) of teachers’ job they find the most challenging**

Managing large classroom sizes of students who were very young and did not have a lot of language knowledge as well as completing the syllabus in the time given and assessment were other challenges that teachers in Spain and Russia faced.

Thus, challenges connected with implementing the policy of early start that were discussed earlier were common in Russia and Spain: the pressure to ‘cover the syllabus’ (Shankar & Gunashekar, 2016); motivation, attention, multi-level groups (Nunan, 2011); discipline, teaching large classes (Copland et al., 2013; Garton et al., 2011) were named by some of the respondents as the most challenging aspects of their jobs. The “leaders”

of the list of challenges were discipline (17 respondents in total) and motivation (13 respondents in total).



## 5 Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate current beliefs of English teachers to very young learners about the best methodology, the use of L1 during the lesson, and the main challenges the teachers experience when teaching very young learners, comparing the opinions of Spanish teachers with those of their colleagues from Russia. This section brings the findings and the literature together.

The discussion chapter will present the data from the previous section in relation to the research questions and hypotheses in order to see if they can be confirmed or refuted.

Regarding our first research question, the most effective method to teach English to very young learners, as it was predicted in the first hypothesis and stated in most of the modern and classical research papers (Mourão, 2015; Putro et al., n.d.; Dewar, 2008-2014; Whitebread, 2012; Vygotsky, 1966 and others), was the play-based learning. 100% of respondents in Russia and 92.9% of respondents in Spain found using play and fun-oriented activities to teach very young learners the most useful.

Moreover, among the methods and practices teachers usually used to teach very young learners, games and play-oriented activities were claimed to be the most popular: 71% of respondents in Russia and 39% of respondents in Spain.

Generally, teachers' beliefs about the most effective method to teach English to very young learners and the method or practices teachers usually use to teach very young learners were the same with games and play-oriented activities remaining the most common method the teachers used in both countries.

In addition, the research has not found any evidence in Spain or Russia of Nuktong' statement (as cited in Cheep-Aranai et al., 2015) that the most common form of teaching found at early learning levels is the lesson when young learners are taught in

the same way as adults, not getting the opportunity to create, use English and enjoy: teachers claimed to use the games and play-oriented activities during their lessons with very young learners.

Concerning the second research question about differences and/or similarities existing between the views of English teachers' for very young learners on the use of L1 during the lesson in Spain and Russia, the teachers' views appeared to be similar in both countries.

As the results of the questionnaire showed, most teachers in Russia tended to believe that L1 should be used in the English classroom when teaching young learners while their colleagues in Spain did not show the same tendency: they could not provide a definite answer to that question. One of the reasons for that could be the number of native speakers of English or other languages teaching in Spain who might not speak students' L1 or the teachers' beliefs that only English should be used during the lesson, for instance, immersion had been named an effective teaching method for very young learners by Spanish respondents.

Following several influential papers (Thompson, 2006; Duff & Polio, 1990; Macaro, 2001; Blackman, 2013-2014), this study confirmed that teachers in Russia and Spain used the L1 during the lesson and that the extent of use and reasons for it varied. Based on the questionnaire, it seems likely that almost half of the teachers in Spain (54%) and most teachers in Russia (76%) use the L1 at least sometimes. The remaining teachers never used it or used it "almost never" used it.

Besides, the research found some evidence that teachers did not use a native language in class randomly but employed it for specific purposes.

Teachers preferred to use the L1 for grammar explanation (52% of Russian respondents and 14% of respondents in Spain); managing the classroom (19% of

respondents in Russia and 57% respondents in Spain); define new vocabulary (24% in Russia and 36% in Spain), develop a relationship with students (33% in Russia and 36% in Spain), check comprehension (43% in Russia and 36% in Spain); providing feedback (33% in Russia and 21% in Spain). Even though “translation is not appropriate to be implemented in the process of teaching and learning a language” (Putry, 2015, p.4), it was used in both countries: 43% of teachers in Russia and 21% of teachers in Spain used L1 to translate.

Therefore, teachers in Russia and Spain used L1 for more or less the same purposes, meaning the second hypothesis was proved as well. The data also reveals that the situations when teachers use L1 occur in managing both language and non-language aspects of teaching. This finding supports the idea of Blackman (2013-2014) that a students’ native language has a role during the English lesson.

The third research question aimed to discover the extent to which the main challenges the teachers experience in teaching English to very young learners coincide in Spain and Russia.

The hypothesis that “there is more obvious variation in main challenges the teachers experience in teaching English to very young learners in Spain and Russia” appeared hard to prove since teachers in Russia and Spain experienced a lot of similar difficulties but also some challenges that were specific for each country. Though, all of the challenges in both countries were named and described in the literature review as the challenges common for teachers all around the world.

Thus, teachers in both countries taught fewer hours per week (2 hours per week in Russia and 1 or 2 hours per week in Spain) than they believed they should have (3 - 4 hours per week) and was one of the challenges the teachers all around the world faced:

having not enough hours of English at education establishments to teach very young learners (Garton et al., 2011 ).

As the answers to the questionnaire demonstrated, the problem mentioned by such researchers as Mathew and Pani (as cited Al-Ali & Mann, 2019), Copland, et al. (2013) and others existed in both countries: not having enough teaching materials. Even if the majority of teachers in both countries agreed that they had enough of the suitable materials to teach very young learners, they still created the teaching materials by themselves and spent from 1 to 5 hours per week for this in Russia and from 10-15 minutes to 3 hours per week in Spain.

Hence, another challenge common for teachers around the world such as creating materials to teach very young learners emerged.

Regarding the level of proficiency and fluency teachers need in order to teach very young learners, teachers both in Spain and Russia emphasized that not only the level of language proficiency and fluency was important but also the skills the teacher had. As it was mentioned earlier, no one in Russia thought that teachers of very young learners should have been native speakers of English. It could be explained by the fact that non-native English teaching predominated in Russia.

Another challenge that teachers around the world faced was completing the syllabus. As the results show, this problem was common for the respondents in Spain but not the teachers in Russia: most of the participants in Russia did not feel under pressure to complete the syllabus (only 3 respondents out of 21 felt it).

Almost all of the respondents in Spain, on the contrary, felt under pressure to complete the syllabus at least sometimes (20 respondents out of 28).

As per the difficulties connected with the classroom context and learners, challenges that arose from implementing the “early start” policy were claimed

by respondents in both countries: motivation (28.6% in Spain and 28.6% in Russia), multi-level groups (5% in Russia and 4% in Spain), discipline (57.1% of respondents in Russia and 57.1% respondents in Spain) and teaching large classes (23.8% in Russia and 35.7% in Spain) being the most challenging aspects of their jobs. Such challenges were mentioned by Shankar & Gunashekar (2016), Nunan, (2011); Copland et al. (2013) and Garton et al. (2011) and described in the literature review in more details.

In conclusion, it seems that most of the challenges the teachers around the world face are typical for the teachers in both countries, though some of them have a more localized nature.

## **6 Conclusions**

This chapter summarizes the findings and explores implications for the theory of English language teaching of very young learners. The chapter ends by outlining the limitations of this study and provides some suggestions for future research.

### **6.1 Implications of the research**

The results of the research present several implications for English language teaching (ELT), especially for teaching very young learners.

The study reveals that teachers in Spain and Russia face a lot of challenges when teaching the named age group. The main culprits are having not enough English lessons for very young learners per week, not having enough and appropriate teaching materials to teach very young learners and the necessity of creating them, feeling under pressure to complete the syllabus, students' lack of motivation, catering to multi-level groups, maintaining discipline and teaching large classes. Therefore, curriculum developers, administrators and other stakeholders should take all of the found challenges into account and try to improve the situation. While the policy of implementing English at earlier ages is still an ongoing process all around the world, the changes can be done and the research can contribute to that changes. For instance, this reveals the importance of selecting textbooks and other materials suitable for the level and considering the psychological features of very young learners.

Another important finding of the study from an ELT perspective was that teachers, as revealed by participants in both countries, regarded the level of language proficiency and fluency as important as the skills the teacher has while mentioning that not all university and other degrees provide an opportunity to learn how to teach very young learners. This highlights the importance of incorporating the pedagogical principles, a study of child psychology and development into both pre-

service and in-service teacher training curriculums. Only then can teachers be expected to have improved awareness of the different methodology and techniques necessary to teach English to this specific age group.

The data collected also had an important function in terms of determining the best methodology for teaching English to very young learners and the appropriateness of using L1 in class. The activities that contribute most to the children's L2 acquisition are games and other play-oriented tasks. Most respondents in Russia and Spain have emphasized the importance of children's play, thus, returning to the idea expressed by Piaget, Montessori, the UK's Department for Education (Cass, 2020, para. 4), Vygotsky (1966), and others that children learn best through play.

The opinion supported by Enever & Moon (2009) about many English teachers teaching young learners using L1 frequently was confirmed for Russia and Spain. The reasons for doing so have been studied too and revealed that L1 can have a role during the class (Blackman, 2013-2014). Therefore, teachers and stakeholders may pay attention not to avoiding the students' native language completely but choosing carefully when and how to use it: for what reasons and to what extent.

## **6.2 Limitations**

The research holds several limitations that require consideration when assessing its contribution to the literature.

Even though a questionnaire is claimed to be an efficient method of collecting large amounts of data, it can "struggle to penetrate a theme deeply or identify emerging themes" (Blackman, 2013/2014, p.23). To reduce this risk both qualitative and quantitative data have been used.

Additionally, relying on qualitative data may lead to the research lacking of generalisability to wider contexts: the findings may not reflect teachers' beliefs across

the whole Russia or Spain, although the researcher tried to make them representative of all teachers within the countries by distributing links personally, on social media and specific platforms for teachers available in different parts of Russia and Spain.

Another limitation is time: since the questionnaire was only available to be filled in for 16 days (date of administration: 15.04.2021-30.04.2021), there could be some information missed from the potential respondents who wanted or planned to participate later, after the access to the questions had been already restricted.

### **6.3 Further Research**

The theoretical and empirical literature on teachers' beliefs teaching very young learners is comparatively limited. Further study could involve a greater number of countries and participants to allow for more areas of research.

Specifically, gender is among several factors that were found to influence teaching styles (El-Emadi et al., 2019), their beliefs and behaviour (Kraker-Pauw et al., 2016; Throndsen, 2012). Future research could explore the influence of gender on the teachers' beliefs.

A related issue is that, unlike Spain, most of the English teachers in Russia teaching very young learners and teachers, in general, are female. The reasons for that could be connected with teachers' low salaries or a profession of a teacher not being prestigious for a man. Some other reasons can be found during further research.

Next, the results of the study proved the ideas about the predominance of non-native English teaching in Russia and the fact that Russia “lags behind” the global linguistic unification process (Abramova et al., 2013): more than a half of English teachers in Spain are native English speakers and the majority of non-native English-speaking teachers experienced living in English-speaking countries while all the



teachers in Russia are non-native speakers who have never experienced living in an English-speaking country.

The difference in data could be explained by the following reasons: low salary of Russian teachers, the recent differences between the Russian higher education system and the education system in Europe, and a minority of Russians speaking English as a second language. Still, this topic is of great interest and can be investigated in the future.

Finally, most of the teachers in Russia believed they had enough pedagogical skills to teach very young learners while half of the teachers in Spain were not so sure or thought they did not have enough of them. In other words, teachers in Russia look more confident in their skills than teachers in Spain. The reasons for this could also be explored in further studies.

#### **6.4 Conclusion**

On the whole, teachers' beliefs about teaching young learners is a burgeoning field, with much more research required.

This study adds substantially to the understanding of the topic of teaching English to very young learners in Spain and Russia with regard to their education systems. The teachers' beliefs in both countries have been found comparable since the topics of interest regarding teaching English to very young learners all around the world are similar. We believe that findings may improve knowledge and current practices about teaching English in general and very young learners in particular. Thus, this research is beneficial, valuable, and important for the ELT field.

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## Appendix A

**Comparative table of Russian and Spanish educational systems and the ways of teaching English to very young learners**

<b>country</b>	<b>obligation to attend pre-primary education</b>	<b>number of children attending pre-primary education, %</b>	<b>age of children to begin learning English (according to national legislation), years</b>	<b>age of children to begin learning English (if parents want to and can afford it), years</b>	<b>class size, students</b>	<b>type of teaching</b>	<b>type of students</b>	<b>common types of educational institutions</b>	<b>type of educational institutions providing lessons to very young learners</b>
Spain	optional	97	8	3	22	both native and non-native	monolingual, bilingual, trilingual	public, semi-public, private	both public and private
Russia	optional	98	8	3	10-12	non-native mostly	monolingual mostly	public	mostly private

## **Appendix B**

### **Questionnaire**

#### **“Teacher’s beliefs about teaching English to very young learners in Spain and Russia.”**

Date of administration: 15.04.2021-30.04.2021

*The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather information on the beliefs of English teachers to very young learners comparing the opinions of Spanish teachers with those of their colleagues from Russia.*

The data will be used for the Master project in Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign/Second Language at the UNIVERSITAT ROVIRA I VIRGILI.

*(please try to answer all the questions and provide details if possible)*

#### **Part 1.**

- 1. Please indicate your gender:**
  - a) Male
  - b) Female
  - c) Prefer not to say
  
- 2. Please indicate your nationality:**
  
- 3. Please indicate your native language/s:**
  
- 4. How old are you?**
  - a) 18-25
  - b) 26-30
  - c) 31-40
  - d) 41-55
  - e) 56 and above
  
- 5. Where do you teach? (Type of school you teach in most often):**
  - a) State school
  - b) Private school
  - c) Language academy/training center
  - d) Other (please specify)

- 6. What is your teaching experience in full years?**
- a) 0-5
  - b) 6-10
  - c) 11-15
  - d) 16-20
  - e) 21 or more
- 7. What age groups do you teach?**
- a) 3-6 years old only
  - b) 3-6 years old and other ages
- 8. Are you a native English speaker?**
- a) Yes (move to question number 10 directly)
  - b) No
- 9. Have you ever lived in an English-speaking country for over 3 months or more? If yes, please provide details (which country, the length of stay, the reason for the stay).**
- 10. Have you received a formal qualification in teaching English as a foreign language?**
- a) Yes
  - b) No
  - c) Currently studying for one
- 11. Please specify your highest qualification received (for instance, a college degree in arts; a Master's degree in engineering, etc.):**
- 12. Do you feel like your qualifications are enough to work with very young learners (3 - 6 years old)?**
- 13. Why do you think your qualifications are enough/not enough to work with very young learners (3 - 6 years old)?**

**14. Do you have enough pedagogical skills (an understanding of the principles of child development along with pedagogy principles) to teach very young learners? (in your opinion)**

*Choose the number that corresponds with your opinion.*

Not enough at all	Not enough	More or less enough	Enough	More than enough
1	2	3	4	5

**15. Would you like to get training on developing pedagogical skills to teach very young learners (3 - 6 years old)?**

- a) Yes
- b) No
- c) Maybe

**16. How would you assess your English proficiency level using a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1= not at all proficient; 10 = totally proficient)?**

**If you are a native speaker, please choose the "Native" option for all of the rows.**

Speaking	Listening	Writing	Reading	Overall

**Part 2.**

**17. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "A native language (L1) should be used in the English classroom when teaching young learners".**

*Choose the number that corresponds with your opinion.*

Strongly disagree	Mostly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Mostly agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

**18. When do you think it is appropriate to use a native language (L1) in class with very young learners (3 - 6 years old)? (more than one answer is possible)**

- a) to explain grammar
- b) to define new vocabulary
- c) to manage the classroom
- d) to develop a relationship with students
- e) to translate
- f) to check comprehension
- g) to provide feedback
- h) other (please, specify)

**19. How often do you use a native language (L1) in the English classroom with very young learners (3 - 6 years old)? Choose the number that corresponds with your opinion.**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
1	2	3	4	5

**20. Which of the following recommendations about practices to teach very young learners (3 - 6 years old) do you find the most useful? (more than one answer is possible)**

- a) Supplement activities with visuals, realia, and movement.
- b) Involve students in making visuals and realia.
- c) Move from activity to activity.
- d) Using play- and fun-oriented activities.
- e) Use stories and contexts familiar to students.
- f) Establish classroom routines in English.
- g) Use L1 as a resource when necessary.
- h) Bring in helpers from the community (parents, students, teachers to tell a story, etc.)
- i) Collaborate with other teachers in your school.
- j) Communicate with other TEYL professionals.

**21. Do you feel that you have enough suitable materials including the textbooks to teach very young learners?**

Strongly disagree	Mostly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Mostly agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

**22. Do you create materials to teach very young learners (3 - 6 years old)? If yes, how many hours per week approximately do you dedicate to material creation?**

**23. Do you feel that the number of hours per week dedicated to English for very young learners (3 - 6 years old) at educational institutions should be:**

- a) 1 hour
- b) 2 hours
- c) 3 - 4 hours
- d) 5 or more

**24. What is the real number of hours very young learners (3 - 6 years old) have at the educational institution you work (per week)?**

**25. How often do you feel under pressure to complete the syllabus?**

Always	Often	Sometimes	Almost never	Never
1	2	3	4	5

**26. Which problems connected with the classroom context and learners do you usually face when teaching very young learners? (more than one answer is possible)**

- a) Large classes
- b) Problems of control and discipline
- c) Number of hours per week dedicated to English
- d) Limited possibilities to do a lot of different things in class
- e) Designing learning experiences and tasks that are suitable for different stages of students' development and their diversity
- f) Learners' low level of proficiency
- g) Difficulties with assessment of students' work
- h) A lack of motivation and interest in English on the part of learners

### **Part 3.**

**27. In your opinion, what level of proficiency and fluency teachers need in order to teach very young learners (3 - 6 years old)?**

**28. What do you think is the most effective method to teach English to very young learners?**

**29. What method/practices do you usually use to teach very young learners (3 - 6 years old)?**

**30. Which aspect or aspects of your job do you find the most challenging?**

**Thank you!**