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CULTURAL EXCHANGES: PROVERBS AND SAYINGS AS A
GENRE OF ORAL TRADITION

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Abstract

This pilot study looking at regional immigration is being done within the Education Project for development carried out at the SAFA University Centre in collaboration with the University of Jaen. It has been carried out by first-year undergraduate students (in the Pre-school Education program) with preschool children aged three to five from the SAFA School in Úbeda. The main purpose of this study has been to contribute from an intercultural perspective to the development of an aware, responsible and committed public. To do this, we have followed a methodology based on a quasi-experimental design to obtain information after an intervention through several reading and writing sessions of proverbs and sayings which have been monitored by undergraduate students. This study aims to be the preamble for a more extensive experimental research with children of three, four and five years from different centers in Andalucía. The results obtained show that a different evolution happens in the different groups. In fact, these results also indicate that the children's understanding in oral literature has increased as a way to approach and take interest in other cultural realities.

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1. Introduction

We are facing the realities of global transformation that requires a response to new social needs. Within the context of inevitable transformation in which we find ourselves, we understand that intercultural education can be very useful (Arroyo, 2013). However, despite living next to and comingling with different cultures, languages and religions, the interest in implementing intercultural practices is very slow in a multicultural, multilingual and multireligious societies such as ours. According to Dietz (2017):

It is increasingly common to use the notion of interculturality to refer to the relationships that exist between the various human groups that make up a society. It refers to the relationships that exist within society between diverse majority-minority constellations, and that are defined not only in terms of culture, but also in terms of ethnicity, language, religious denomination and/or nationality. Therefore, the empirical reference point for each of these constellations is highly contextual: in some societies, interculturality is used to refer to the diversity "caused" by migration, while in others the same notion is applied to interactions between indigenous peoples and descendants of colonizers (p.192).

Our research consists of a pilot study on the contribution of proverbs and sayings and its influence on preschool children. It is part of a Research and Education Project for Community Development of the SAFA University Center in collaboration with the University of Jaén titled: "Temporary Immigrants in the Province of Jaén: Opportunity for Awareness and Commitment." Its aim is for the university to contribute towards an aware, responsible and committed public, as well as to expose university students (those pursuing a Degree in Early Childhood Education of the University Center SAFA of Úbeda, in coordination with the University of Jaén) to the perspective of intercultural education through teaching, research and action (Manzano, Pedrosa, & Soto, 2017; Soto and Pedrosa, 2017; De la Cruz, 2016; Gordo, Felicidades, & Menor, 2013; Prieto, 2010).

2. Problem Statement

Our study has been carried out with preschool children aged three to five from the SAFA in Úbeda. The experience has focused on putting them in contact with other cultural realities to raise awareness of the richness of different cultures from an intercultural perspective. In this sense, proverbs and sayings constitute a literary genre present in all societies with similar characteristics, structure and purpose.

Nowadays, most of the published studies on interculturalism have been approached from the pedagogy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology fields, as well as other sciences related to intercultural research. In the same way, the methodological approach to teaching proverbs and sayings is limited to the teaching of language in the classroom (Sevilla Muñoz et al., 2005; García, 2006; Barbadillo de la Fuente, 2006, 2008). Therefore, we consider it necessary to encourage the students to have "awareness, abilities and intercultural capacity" from an intercultural and paremiology base that allows them to participate in different areas of social life (Council of Europe, 2002, p.60).

Within the framework of the proposal made by the European Union, linguistic communication and social and civic competences are noted. The first refers to "the ability to express and interpret concepts, thoughts, feelings, facts and opinions orally and in writing and to interact in an appropriate and creative

way in multiple social and cultural contexts". The second, makes it possible "to communicate with other people, to understand what they are conveying, to experience different realities and to use self-expression as way to connect to other people, thus facilitating the social and cultural integration of people "(Decree of March 17, 2015, pp. 154-155).

This new approach has more to do with intercultural education (a fundamental component of the curriculum) than with linguistic learning and, therefore, this approach should be seen as a form of multilingual and pluricultural enrichment. This is explained by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR): "[...] he or she does not keep these languages and cultures in strictly separate mental compartments, but rather builds up a communicative competence to which all knowledge and experience of language contributes and in which languages interrelate and interact" (Council of Europe, 2002). In addition, the Decree of August 5, 2008, which establishes the curriculum of Early Childhood Education in Andalusia, aims as a part of its objectives, to bring children closer to the cultural realities surrounding them so that they learn to take part in and appreciate different experiences (Seville, 2004). For this reason, one of the essential tools for the development of intercultural education in the classroom is paremiology and, in particular, the use of proverbs and sayings, since it is no longer a question of mastering several languages, but rather that "plurilingualism has itself to be seen in the context of pluriculturalism" (Council of Europe, 2002, p.22).

Intercultural education through proverbs and sayings implies three simultaneous functions: cultural, communicative and cognitive. The first, where the use of proverbs and sayings gives us access to new knowledge and cultural experiences that are transmitted from generation to generation and, at the same time, gives us the opportunity to share this knowledge and experiences with others. As noted by Sevilla Muñoz and Barbadillo de la Fuente (2005), the reading of proverbs and sayings from different parts of the world is essential for getting a better understanding of other cultures; secondly, the communicative function that favours and enhances communicative strategies and skills in learning to use proverbs and sayings in linguistically and diverse cultural contexts. And finally, the cognitive function of proverbs and sayings that allows us to think and represent the world and, in addition, helps us to understand our world in a different way.

In short, proverbs and sayings, especially during early childhood education, are shown to be very useful and appropriate resource for the acquisition and development of language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), and the means for peaceful coexistence in the classroom.

3. Research Questions

Intercultural education contributes to the formation of a more humane, more just and more compassionate society. This is the starting point of our study. We wanted the students, both the preschool and university students, to learn about and understand other cultures, in this way encourage the inclusion and coexistence of different cultures in the classroom.

In order to do this, we start from the oral tradition present in all cultures, and in particular, from the sayings and proverbs of the young student's countries of origin. We propose as an initial hypothesis that "the reading and writing of proverbs and sayings in early childhood education helps students to understand their meaning and take an interest in oral tradition."

Working through the elements of the oral tradition promotes learning processes with an intercultural perspective that promotes the formation of an aware and committed citizenship.

4. Purpose of the Study

The purposes of the investigation have the following aspects:

1. To raise awareness among our university students and preschool students about the richness of different cultures from an intercultural perspective.
2. To understand that proverbs and sayings constitute a literary genre that appears in all cultures and countries of the world.
3. To favour the integration and coexistence of different cultures in the classroom through reading, dialogue and listening to proverbs and sayings.
4. To promote collaborative initiatives between our preschool and university student for general social and civic learning, through the reading and writing of proverbs and sayings in a way that enhances social and communication skills and attitudes of respect and curiosity about diversity and interculturality.
5. To contribute to the advancement of linguistic competence through the creation of a cooperative inter-level assignment consisting of the creation of proverbs and sayings

5. Research Methods

The research method carried out with preschool children has followed a methodology based on the construction of knowledge and has been monitored by first-year undergraduate students in the Pre-school Education program. These students acted as intervention agents with a training program taught by the researchers. At first, they looked into pre-existing ideas about proverbs and sayings in the preschool classrooms. Then, they searched for information on the proverbs and sayings (what they are, their origin, what structure they have, types of proverbs, what they are for, etc.). The results collected showed that there were no differences between the groups of three, four and five years as well as that children did not know the meaning of the proverbs and sayings.

Next, the undergraduate students selected some proverbs and sayings from the children's various backgrounds. The university students carried out seven reading sessions for the proverbs and seven readings for the sayings emphasizing the tone with which they had been written (festive, melancholic, grieving, etc.). Finally, in each session, through the students' interpretations a common understanding was reached.

Similarly, there were six writing sessions about the proverbs and sayings for the three-year olds children that slightly differed from the four- and five-year-olds children. In the case of the 3-year-olds, parts of the proverb or the sayings were written on loose papers to look for possible combinations later. With four and five-year-olds children, a part of the proverb or idiom was chosen and later they completed it, creating a new one. We chose to show the lyrics of the proverbs and sayings to children because we believe that reading the idiomatic expressions in its context may influence the young children's learning as well.

Once the writing session had finished, the composition was looked at to verify that there was compliance with the properties of the text (adequacy, coherence and cohesion). Finally, a mural with all the completed student proverbs was made to present to the other preschool classes.

Our research is part of a pilot study of quasi-experimental design that tries to collect data to carry out a larger experimental research with a sample of children in preschool education from different centers of the community to extract meaningful results related to the use of proverbs and sayings as a means of understanding and interest in oral tradition.

5.1. Sample

Participants have been preschool children aged three to five from the SAFA school of Úbeda. There was a total of one hundred twenty-five children, seventy-two females and fifty-three males.

Eleven of the children were born in different countries but emigrated to Spain at the age of two and they did not consider Spanish as their native language. Only two children understood the meaning of all proverbs and sayings and showed interest in this oral tradition, six children understood the meaning of one or two proverbs/sayings, although they showed less interest in this oral tradition and three children understood none of the proverbs or sayings.

5.2. The questionnaire

The questionnaire *ad hoc* was designed to measure the impact of these evaluation criteria on the young children's learning. To do this, we elaborated the questionnaire based on the evaluation criteria of the preschool children that allowed us to measure the degree of evolution in boys and girls from the sessions monitored by the undergraduate students. Three criteria were developed with evaluation indicators and passed to a group of ten expert teachers on them. They rejected one of the criteria and applied it to a sample of twenty-five children of four-year-old who did not participate in the experience. Finally, the criteria and indicators were refined and passed on to the sample of children participating in the experience.

Children (aged three to five-years-old) were evaluated by their teachers of childhood education once these were trained by the researchers to be able to use the questionnaire with the evaluation criteria established. When the data was collected, a statistical analysis was carried out through the SPSS V.21 program with a comparison of the medians. This allowed the results to be analysed to verify if the research hypothesis was met or not. Nevertheless, this data is expected to be used in another study. This pilot study aims to establish the conditions and guidelines which will guide a future experimental research project using the information obtained in this study.

6. Findings

After the data collection and its subsequent statistical treatment of this pilot study of quasi-experimental design, the results that appear show that the initial hypothesis shows different results in different groups. At first, the groups of three, four and five years were evaluated with the questionnaire that served as the basis for evaluating the groups after the intervention. The groups did initially appear to be different. In none of the groups did the children know the proverbs and sayings nor understand their meaning. However, after the intervention, the data obtained shows that children become more interested in other

cultures by learning about sayings and proverbs, and also demonstrate an evolution in their understanding of the richness of cultures.

In the following graphs we can see the values that fall within the 95% confidence interval. In the first of them, we can see the comparison between the medians of the groups of three, four and five-year-old children with respect to the first criterion "to understand the meaning of the proverbs and sayings". The data suggest that there is less understanding with the three-year-olds (1.11) with respect to the score obtained with the four and five-year-olds (2.50 and 2.54, respectively). In these last two groups there is an evolution with respect to the first group of children.

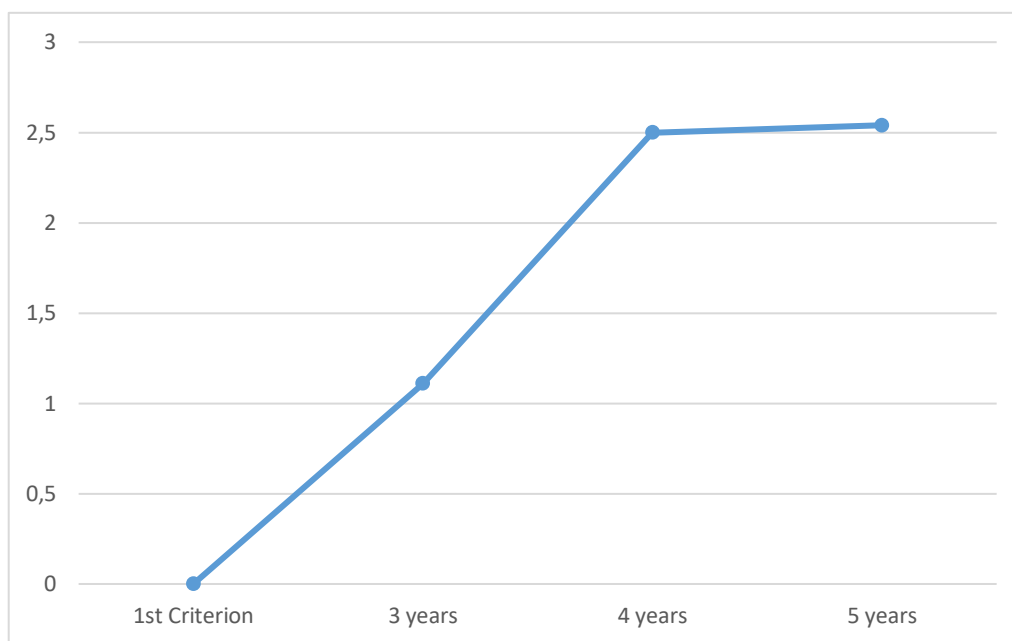


Figure 01. Understanding the meaning of proverbs and sayings

Regarding the second criterion "to show interest in oral tradition", the results point in the same direction. There is a lower degree of acquisition in three-year-olds (2.0) and a similar level of acquisition in four-year-olds (3.82) and in five-year-olds (3.12). The data shows that children are interested in oral tradition, referred in our case to proverbs and sayings. We can even detect a higher value in the group of four-year-olds compared to the five-year-olds that can be explained by the systematic work carried out by the teacher based on a weekly reading each done by university students. This has contributed to the students finally reaching an adequate understanding of the meaning and meaning of proverbs and sayings.

The initial hypothesis is fulfilled differently in the group of three-year-olds compared to the four and five-year olds. We can say with a fair amount of confidence that through the development of meaningful experiences that bring oral tradition into to the classroom, an approach to other cultures is produced from an intercultural perspective.

We can see that the results obtained in this quasi-experimental study show that after the didactic intervention monitored by the undergraduate students, the groups have developed differently in three, four and five years. In general, the three-year group shows inferior results in both criteria. However, the group of four and five years have developed in a similar way.

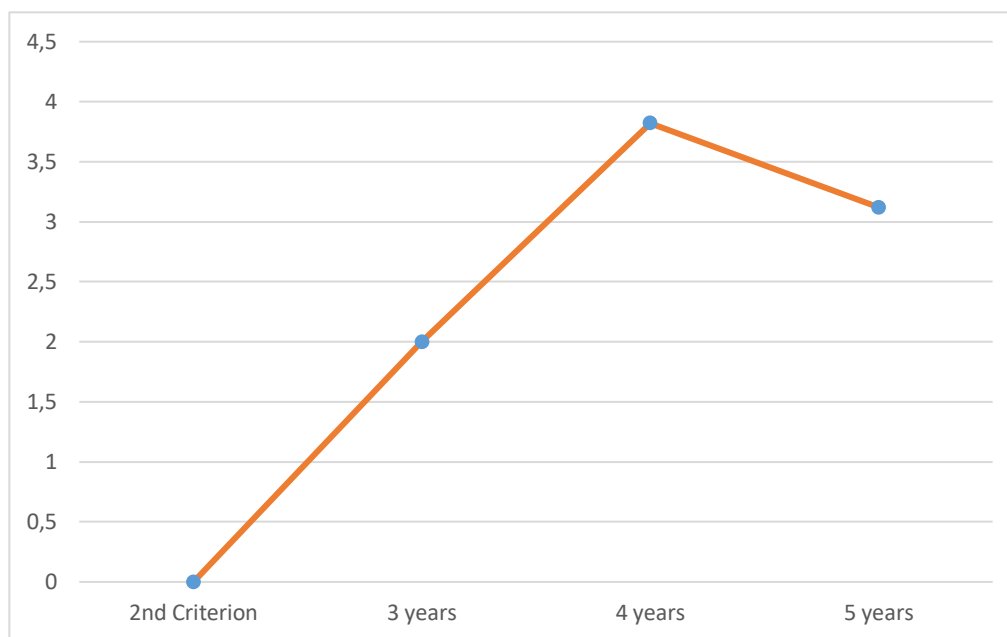


Figure 02. Showing interest in oral tradition

7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to measure the impact of these evaluation criteria on young children's learning. To do this, we have focused mainly on two evaluation criteria:

- Understanding the meaning of the proverbs and sayings
- Showing interest in oral tradition.

The results show that children who practice reading and writing of the proverbs and sayings during several sessions appear to understand the content of these idiomatic expressions better. It seems as though the use of proverbs and sayings, being brief linguistic structures but at the same time loaded with socio-cultural content, was a very useful tool for approaching certain cultural realities. There were, of course, exceptions, such as “we all make mistakes”, “two heads are better than one” were fully understood or partially understood by children. On the other hand, some sayings such as “a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush” were misunderstood or not understood at all. However, in general most proverbs and sayings were recognized and explained with a full or partial understanding and, therefore, children showed a better and deeper understanding of the idiomatic expressions.

In addition to this, we would like to stress the effort that SAFA's early education university students have to make in order to understand and to interpret the proverbs and sayings is also very useful, since it requires the development of communicative skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) and cultural skills (personal values, principles and behavioural norms of a particular society) in the classroom.

We can affirm that the reading of proverbs and sayings is tangibly beneficial for the students and it allows them to understand that these elements of oral tradition are found in different cultures and highlights their points of overlap. Through listening, dialogue and the creation of proverbs and sayings, knowledge of other cultural traditions is attained, creating awareness in children, but also in the undergraduate students

that collaborate in this experience. Likewise, the intervention with children promoted the interaction between students from different cultures and countries, which encouraged coexistence among children in the preschool education.

Finally, the training received by the undergraduate students to carry out reading and writing sessions with children of preschool education have enhanced the inter-level collaboration and have contributed to the development of social and communication skills among the participants.

This is the way to create aware, reflective, tolerant and supportive citizens beginning in the early stages of preschool education.

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