Child task-based interaction in EFL settings: research and challenges

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ABSTRACT

Task-based language teaching research has expanded substantially in foreign language (FL) contexts but most research studies have been carried out with young adults in university settings, despite the fact that FL programs for children are on the increase worldwide. However, there is a clear lack of research-based evidence of what children actually do while performing tasks, which is crucial in order to make decisions about appropriate educational provision, to inform policy makers, and to maximize children's learning opportunities. This paper focuses on current research on children in task-based programs both in mainstream English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) contexts. It reviews studies that show how children successfully negotiate to make language meaningful, how they engage with the tasks and how they collaborate in different ways during task performance. Challenges and future research directions will be highlighted.

KEYWORDS: Children, CLIL, cognitive, EFL, interaction, sociocultural, tasks.

1. INTRODUCTION

As Shehadeh (2018: viii) has recently pointed out, "Task-based language teaching (TBLT) research and implementation has expanded substantially in range and scope to new boundaries". Among those boundaries, the author mentions three in particular: (i) TBLT and second language (L2) writing (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014), (ii) TBLT and technology (González-Lloret & Ortega, 2014), and (iii) TBLT in foreign language (FL)

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contexts. This paper focuses on the third of these boundaries and, in particular, on research on tasks carried out with child (6-12) participants in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context.

A FL context is one where the teaching of the language other than the native language takes place in the learners' own country and, in most cases, is a school subject. Task-based implementation in FL contexts takes place within "a set of conditions and social practices that do not necessarily coincide with those in [second language] contexts (Shehadeh, 2012: 3-4). Although some authors have claimed that there are several problems associated with the implementation of TBLT in all FL contexts (institutional, teacher- and learner-related, see Carless, 2002, 2003; Shehadeh, 2012, for details), numerous research studies are being carried out in these settings (García Mayo, 2007, 2017; Sato & Ballinger, 2016; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2012; Thomas & Reinders, 2015; Van den Branden, 2006), particularly within two second language acquisition (SLA) frameworks, namely cognitive (Long, 1996; Mackey, 2007; Pica, 2013) and sociocultural (Storch, 2013; Swain, 2006; Vygotsky, 1978), briefly described below.

As Bygate (2016) mentions, studies couched within a *cognitive approach* (Long, 1996) try to analyze the relationship between tasks and the incidence of negotiation of meaning between students and to measure the impact of task features on effective language use and language processing. Studies within a *sociocultural framework* (Vygotsky, 1978) consider how learners help each other while completing tasks and assess learner collaboration and first language (L1) use. The sociocultural framework promotes the use of collaborative tasks in order to co-construct new knowledge. Swain (2006) claims that collaborative dialogue is a crucial source of learning because it is by means of a process she refers to as *languaging* that learners make meaning of their interaction and also shape their knowledge and experience.

The overwhelming majority of these FL studies have been carried out with adolescents and young adults in university settings. Research has been conducted with true beginners (Payant & Reagan, 2018); false beginners (Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2007, 2009); intermediate (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2015; Basterrechea & García Mayo, 2013; García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016; Fernández Dobao, 2012; Fujii & Mackey, 2009; Gurzynski-Weiss, Henderson & Jung, 2018; Kim, 2013; Kim & Tracy-Ventura, 2013; McDonough & Wichian, 2009; McDonough, Crawford & De Vleeschauwer, 2016; Wen, 2018) and advanced FL learners (García Mayo, 2002a, 2002b; García Mayo & Pica, 2000a, 2000b; Gilabert, Barón & Llanes, 2009). In most cases, tasks were used as research instruments and created with little input from the teachers, who did not usually integrate them in their normal instructional routine, although some tasks might have subsequently made their way into actual classroom use (see Butler, 2011; Kim, 2012; Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Ditfurth, 2011; Payant & Reagan, 2018) -there is actually few real classroom-based studies within TBLT. Several findings are consistent in research with adults: different studies have

shown the effectiveness of tasks and collaborative work to draw learners' attention to formal aspects of language (operationalized as language-related episodes (LREs), Swain & Lapkin, 1998) and metalanguage (Basterrechea & García Mayo, 2013; Storch, 2016 for a summary) and the impact of task modality (oral tasks vs. oral+written) on LREs (Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008; García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016; Kuiken & Vedder, 2012; Rouhshad & Storch, 2016) and L1 use and functions (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Azkarai & García Mayo, 2015; Payant & Kim, 2015; Storch and Aldosari, 2010), for example.

Considering that over the last three decades there has been a trend toward the introduction of a FL at earlier ages in school contexts (Cameron, 2003; Enever, 2011, 2018; García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003), it seems striking that only recently has the research lens been placed on young learners (Enever & Lindgren, 2017; García Mayo, 2017; Murphy, 2014; Pinter, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2014). As Oliver and Azkarai (2017: 62) have recently argued, "[…] child second language acquisition (SLA) differs significantly from adult SLA, having its own questions and issues" and, therefore, deserves to be studied in its own right. Findings from this population will help to make decisions about appropriate educational provision, to inform policy makers and to maximize children's learning opportunities. In what follows, we provide the rationale for the interest in research on children and summarize the major findings of recent studies undertaken on interaction in EFL settings. We conclude the paper suggesting lines for future research in this area.

2. EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND THE ROLE OF INTERACTION

2.1. Why early language learning?

It is well known that the number of FL programs for children, mainly with English as the target language, is on the increase worldwide (Pinter, 2011; Enever, 2018). Most of these programs introduce the FL earlier in the education system, typically during primary or even preschool years (Muñoz, 2014). One may wonder about the reasons for this early introduction in contexts where access to authentic input is scarce. There are several arguments that have been put forward in the literature. A powerful reason is the one provided by most governments that their citizens should have a good command of the FL in order to compete in a more globalized world (Enever & Moon, 2009), a position supported by most parents nowadays (Butler, 2014; Enever, 2015). Another argument is that policymakers have extrapolated the successful findings in immersion settings (Lyster, 2007), where the earlier is usually the better, to FL contexts. However, the conditions are not exactly the same regarding the number of pupils per classroom, exposure to appropriate input and curriculum time available, to name but a few (Huang, 2015). Besides, research in FL contexts has shown that

age is just one variable among many others that need to be taken into account (García Mayo & García Lecumberri, 2003; Muñoz, 2006).

In principle, the early introduction of FL in primary schools could be beneficial because children are given the opportunity to learn about other cultures, to develop positive attitudes about languages (Nikolov, 1999) and to develop language awareness strategies (Kearney & Ahn, 2014). In addition, there are certain capacities that children bring to the language classroom (Halliwell, 1992) such as the ability to grasp meaning by drawing on paralinguistic features (intonation, gesture and facial expressions), their willingness to focus on communication rather than accuracy and their instinct for play and fun as well as for interaction and talk.

But, as Johnstone (2009: 38) put it, "simply to assume that all will be well just because the starting age has been lowered is a recipe for confusion". Research on child FL learning is crucial in order to inform policy and create favorable environments for program maintenance. In fact, Collins and Muñoz (2016) have recently highlighted the need for more research on the process of language learning in FL contexts, as programs in those settings are under-represented in the SLA field, especially those with primary school learners, which are the focus of this paper.

2.2. The role of interaction

Although child language acquisition has been approached from several perspectives (Philp, Borowczyk & Mackey, 2017; Philp, Oliver & Mackey, 2008), it is clear that there is a lack of empirical research on what actually goes in the FL classroom when children work in dyads while completing communicative tasks. In FL settings, where exposure to target input is limited, it is crucial to provide learners with as many learning opportunities as possible and interaction clearly plays a crucial role in this process.

Numerous studies to date have recognized the positive role of learner interaction in L2 acquisition (García Mayo & Alcón Soler, 2013; Loewen & Sato, 2018; Long, 1996; Mackey, 2007; Mackey & Goo, 2007). Interaction has been claimed to provide positive input, promote comprehension and draw learners' attention to form-meaning connections. Negotiation of meaning (NoM) is a particular type of interaction, a process whereby conversational routines are modified among partners in order to overcome communication breakdowns. Consider example (1) in which two very young children are completing a picture placement task:

(1)   Child B: how many girls are in the picture?
         Child A: eight
         Child B: what? →**clarification request**
                       (García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016: 255)

Child B uses a clarification request (*what*?) to trigger Child A to clarify his preceding utterance. Clarification requests are one of the types of conversational adjustments that Long (1983) originally identified during NoM. Other conversational adjustments include confirmation checks, in which the listener tries to establish that the preceding utterance has been heard and understood correctly, and comprehension checks, moves by which one speaker tries to determine whether the other speaker has understood a preceding message (see García Mayo & Alcón Soler, 2013 for details). NoM strategies are a sign that learners are engaged with the task they are completing although, as Bygate (2016: 12) states "[…] it remains to be seen how far the full lexico-grammatical range of a language can be acquired through NoM".

A large amount of research to date has resulted from examining the learning conditions that promote interaction (native speaker-non-native speaker pairings, task type, proficiency level) and most of it has centered on adult English as a Second Language (ESL) populations. Clearly, findings from ESL contexts cannot be extended to ESL child interaction and much less to EFL or Content-and-Language Integrated Language (CLIL) settings (Dalton-Puffer, 2011)[1] to determine pedagogical practices. Except for the pioneer research in Canadian immersion programs (see Lyster, 2007 for a review) and by Oliver (2002, 2009 *et passim*) in the Australian ESL setting, little attention has been paid to the process of interaction among primary school learners in FL settings. Following Berk (2006), children between 6-12 would be in their middle-childhood. They have not developed abstract thinking completely but can already consider others' points of view. At a linguistic level, they are more aware of the pragmatics of speech acts and display more metalinguistic awareness than their younger peers (Philp, Oliver & Mackey, 2008). Considering this population will provide in-depth information about how children interact and manage to complete different communicative tasks and will also have important pedagogical implications.

3. CHARTING THE TERRITORY

This section will briefly summarize the studies that, to the best of our knowledge, have dealt with child interaction in a FL setting. We have organized the review on the basis of the major topics they have dealt with, which will allow us to identify the progress that has been made and the gaps in research that are still in need of being addressed.

3.1. Interaction and negotiation of meaning

Van den Branden (1997) carried out one of the early studies on children negotiating to complete a task. In order to assess the effect of various types of negotiation on learners' output, he examined the interaction of three groups of 11-12 year- old children learning

Dutch who were asked to describe pictures to a partner. His findings showed that children picked up words and idioms that they had used in their negotiation of meaning exchanges and that they recycled them in later performance. Pinter (2007) was another pioneering study in an EFL setting. She analyzed the benefits of learner-learner interaction in one pair of 10-year-old Hungarian EFL learners while completing a spot-the-difference task and reported instances of peer assistance and of learners' attention to each other's utterances.

Within the framework of a four-year research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness, both cross-sectional and longitudinal data were collected in three primary schools in two major cities in the north of Spain. The children, aged 6-12, were all beginner learners of English (as attested by Cambridge University Press standardized tests). They all completed several tasks adapted to their age by the researchers with the help of their teachers, in a positive teacher-researcher collaborative experience in task design. Some of the children were enrolled in traditional mainstream EFL programs (3-4 hours of English classes per week) and others in CLIL programs (7-8 hours of both English language and content classes in English per week). The database for the project was finally comprised of the oral interaction of 450 children, which allowed for the carrying out of different studies with a large number of participants and which made our findings robust. In what follows, the major findings of those studies are summarized and related to previous research on the topic whenever that exists.

Lázaro Ibarrola and Azpilicueta Martínez (2015) identified the interactional strategies used by a very young group of 16 7-8 year-old Spanish EFL learners while completing a guessing game task. The learners were paired in eight proficiency-matched dyads and were video-recorded while completing the task. The findings showed that these young children were able to negotiate for meaning and were also able to use the main interactional strategies reported in previous studies. As ESL children (Oliver, 2009), they did not use comprehension checks, which seems to be linked to the children's developmental stage (i.e. egocentricity and lack of interest in their partner's meaning). Although these children negotiated much less than adults and children in ESL contexts, the study provided evidence for the use of communicative tasks to promote interaction in the EFL classroom even at low proficiency levels

García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola (2015) examined differences in amount of NoM between 3rd year and 5th year primary school children (8-9 vs. 10-11) enrolled in EFL and CLIL programs (n= 80). The children, working in dyads, had to complete a picture placement task and end up with different photos placed in the same positions. Their performance (approximately 9 hours) was video-recorded, transcribed and coded to identify the strategies they used to complete the task. For data analysis, the researchers considered the following features: conversational adjustments (clarification requests, confirmation checks, comprehension checks), repetitions (self- and other-repetitions within five speaking terms –

Pica & Doughty, 1985) and L1 use. Their assumption regarding interaction was that more L2 use and more L2 negotiated interaction would be facilitative of language learning. Consider some examples below:

(2) Child A: And what color is your trousers?
    Child B: Blue
    Child A: And what color is your shoes?
    Child B: eh … brown.
    Child A: **Brown?→Confirmation check**

(3) Child A: Is a girl in a park with a ball in her hands **.. you know**? →
                                     Comprehension check

(4) Repetitions
    Child A: What is .. is a ball?
    Child B: Is a ball?
    Child A: A ball

(5) L1 use
    Child A: Is a boy .. play .. eh .. play a football in the park?
    Child B: yes … is *cerca del park* (near the park)

The main finding of the study was that both EFL and CLIL learners negotiated for meaning with age- and proficiency-matched peers. When matched for age (3rd CLIL vs 3rd EFL; 5th CLIL vs 5th EFL), CLIL learners significantly doubled the number of conversational adjustments and made less use of their L1. When matched for context (3rd CLIL vs 5th CLIL; 3rd EFL vs 5th EFL), the younger learners negotiated more, whereas the older used fewer conversational adjustments and made more use of their L1. The findings pointed at real differences in how context and age interact. Nonetheless, the authors acknowledged that other variables might be playing a role. Confidence in the use of the FL by the CLIL learners probably led them to the use of more conversational adjustments and fewer L1 turns. Lack of motivation because the task could have been seen as too easy might have led older learners in both groups to fall back on their L1 more often. Finally, even though all the children participating in the study had a beginner proficiency level as attested by standardized tests, it is true that the older groups had had more hours of classroom instruction, which might have led them to encounter fewer knowledge gaps and, therefore, NoM was less frequent.

Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo (2017a) analyzed the oral interaction of 40 11-year-old children enrolled in a CLIL program. They worked in pairs in order to complete a picture placement task designed by the authors in collaboration with the children's teachers. Their

findings showed that all pairs resolved the task successfully using English, just displaying a moderate use of their L1. Once more, it was confirmed that these children used communicative strategies to a lesser extent that adults and ESL children. One interesting finding was that the authors identified two strategies –acknowledgements and sentence completion– which revealed the learners' willingness to cooperate with each other, thus suggesting that the lack of comprehension checks should not be interpreted as a sign of lack of interest in their partners' production.

The need for longitudinal studies in SLA has always been emphasized (Gass & Mackey, 2007), although it is not an easy task in classroom contexts because access to schools is not always granted and, when it is, it is not always the case that the very same students attend the school the following academic year. The study by Azkarai and Imaz Agirre (2016) provides insights about the changes in the same group of students after one more year of instruction. More precisely, these researchers examined the oral performance of the same children in García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola's (2015) study but when the cohorts were one year older. The comparison was now established between children who were in 4th primary and children in 6th primary in mainstream FL and CLIL contexts. After transcribing and codifying 8 hours and 44 minutes of oral interaction, Azkarai and Imaz Agirre (2016) reported that, once again, younger learners in both settings negotiated more often that the older learners. However, the results regarding learning context were the opposite: when compared with mainstream EFL children, their CLIL counterparts were less likely to fall back on conversational adjustments, possibly because CLIL learners had already gained the necessary language skills to complete the tasks while mainstream EFL learners still needed more practice with them. Nonetheless, we need to consider that the children completed two tasks in this study, the same picture placement task that was used in García Mayo and Lázaro Ibarrola (2015), and a guessing game task. As is well known (García Mayo, 2007; García Mayo & Azkarai, 2016; Payant & Kim, 2017), task type is a variable that cannot be disregarded when assessing learners' production, whether oral or written.

A more recent study within this line of research is García Mayo and Imaz Agirre (2017). The main goal of the study was to assess whether the conversational strategies young EFL learners used would vary depending on their age and the context (mainstream EFL or CLIL) and whether those conversational strategies would change over time. The conversational interaction of 54 learners was analyzed at Time 1 (T1) and Time 2 (T2), one year apart. The children, all of them with a beginner proficiency level, were divided into four groups on the basis of their age (8-9 year -old, 3rd primary, and 10-11 year-old, 5th primary at T1) and learning context (EFL vs. CLIL). They completed two tasks, a picture placement and a guessing game and 9 hours and 26 minutes of interaction were transcribed and coded. The findings confirmed previous research as regards the overall tendency of the data. Thus, younger learners use more conversational adjustments and relied on their L1 to a lesser

extent; children in the CLIL program used fewer conversational adjustments and children in the EFL program used their shared L1 more frequently. Regarding the changes over time, the researchers found a decrease in the use of conversational adjustments among both EFL and CLIL learners.

3.2. Task repetition: negotiation of meaning, pair dynamics and L1 use

Research on TBLT has paid attention to the impact of task conditions on language processing. Among these conditions, task repetition (TR) has received increasing attention over the past decades (Bygate, 2001, 2018). The main claim in the SLA literature is that repeating a task offers learners the possibility of focusing their attention on meaning the first time the task is performed and on focus-on-form (FonF) processes upon TR. Thus, TR becomes a favorable context for language learning because "[…] it can help to give learners space to working on matching meanings to language, and to integrate attention to more redundant features (especially grammatical and phonological) into their speech" (Bygate, 2006: 172). Most studies with EFL children have focused on the impact of TR on complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF) measures of learner performance and have reported mixed findings regarding the interaction between CAF (Shintani, 2012 with Japanese children; Sample & Michel, 2014, with Cantonese children; Bret Blanco, 2014, with Catalan-Spanish children and Kim & Tracy-Ventura, 2013 with adolescent Korean learners). Except for the work by Pinter (2007) with a pair of Hungarian EFL learners, there was no study that focused on the impact of TR on young learners' NoM. Pinter (2007) recorded the two children three times over a three-week period (using a different set of pictures each time) to assess the potential effects of TR. She reported instances of peer assistance and of learners' attention to each other's utterances and suggested that TR could work effectively with children of this age and low proficiency levels. As for child pair dynamics analyzed following Storch's (2002) model, except for the work by Butler and Zeng (2015) to be commented on below, there has not been a study focusing on this topic.

García Mayo and Imaz Agirre (2016) filled this gap by focusing precisely on the impact of TR upon those two constructs: NoM strategies and pair dynamics. They analyzed the oral interaction of 120 EFL children following a CLIL program, 54 were in 3rd year primary (mean age 7.9) and 66 in 4th year (mean age 8.98). After obtaining written consent from parents and school, the children worked on two spot-the-difference tasks agreed upon by teachers and researchers. At T1 all children completed the same task whereas at T2 21 dyads repeated exactly the same task (exact TR), 16 completed the same task type but with different content (procedural TR), and, finally, 23 dyads acted as a control group and completed a guessing game. The video-recorded oral production (approximately 17 hours) was transcribed in CHILDES (McWhinney, 2000) and codified for NoM strategies, L1 use

and pair dynamics. After submitting the data to the corresponding statistical analysis, no significant difference was found regarding NoM strategies at T1 and T2. However, the researchers found that the younger children (3rd primary) fitted mostly in Storch's (2002) collaborative pattern, that is, both members of the dyad contributed to task completion and engaged with each other's ideas, whereas 4th year children fitted mostly in the passive parallel pattern with participants showing minimal engagement with the task. These findings were similar to the ones reported by Butler and Zeng (2015), who studied young learners' developmental differences in interaction during task-based paired language assessment. Their participants were 24 4th grade learners (9–10 years old) and 24 6th grade (11–12 years old) EFL Chinese learners. Their 4th grade learners were also classified as passive–parallel because mutual engagement was lacking or minimal in this group.

Consider examples (6) and (7) to illustrate a collaborative and a passive-parallel pattern, respectively:

(6) Collaborative pattern
    1. Child A: and my picture it's a mountain
    2. Child B: a what?
    3. Child A: a mountain
    4. Child B: ah! Ok
    5. Child A: *montaña* (mountain)
    6. Child B: in my picture no, in my picture .. er… it is .. a two …
    7. Child A: *¿pistola*? (pistol?)
    8. Child B: *la cabeza* (the head)
    9. Child A: *¿qué quieres decir*? (what do you mean?)
    10. Child B: *flechas* (arrows)
    11. Child A: arrows, sí (ok)?
    12. Child B: yes, arrows

(7) Passive/parallel pattern
    1. Child A: there is a snake?
    2. Child B: er .. no
    3. Child A: er .. there is a … hat?
    4. Child B: yes
    5. Child A: there is a rock?
    6. Child B: yes

Example (6) shows that the children fall back on their shared L1 (Spanish) to move the task along but they also use conversational adjustments such as comprehension checks (turns 2, 9) as well as repetitions (turns 3, 5, 11, 12). Both children are engaged with the task and

incorporate each other's suggestions of lexical items, a situation that contrasts with what example (7) illustrates.

What was most interesting was that the younger dyads used LREs, another sign of their engagement with the task and of their focus on formal aspects of the language. Consider (8):

(8) Lexical LRE (3rd year primary dyad)
1. Child A: your person had a star?
2. Child B: a scarf?
3. Child A: a star
4. Child B: *¿estar*? (to be)
5. Child A: no, a star
6. Child B: oh, yes, a star .. hmm … yes, it has a star.

Child B uses a confirmation check in turn 2 because he is not sure about the word he has heard. Child A repeats the word but with a clear epenthetic vowel at the beginning, a typical mistake that Spanish speakers make when uttering English words starting with an 's' and which leads to Child B's misunderstanding and to a third repetition of the lexical item by Child A. Finally, the problem is solved. LREs were totally absent from the interaction of 4th year primary children.

Lázaro Ibarrola and Hidalgo (2017b) explored the effects of procedural TR on the oral interaction of ten pairs of 11-year old CLIL learners who repeated a picture placement task. Their findings revealed that by the third repetition of the task, the number of confirmation checks and repetitions decreased significantly and accuracy improved slightly, whereas complexity and fluency remained stable. On the basis of their results, the authors suggest that procedural TR could be discouraged if the class goal is to promote negotiation. Nevertheless, if the goal is to promote oral communication among peers, procedural TR could be a good pedagogical choice as some gains in accuracy were observed.

TR also plays an important role in first language (L1) use and the functions the L1 serves. Teachers in FL settings are reluctant to let their students work in pairs or small groups because they feel they are going to make use of their shared L1, although research has shown that a balanced use has positive effects for subsequent learning (Antón & DiCamilla, 1998; Brooks & Donato 1994; Alegría de la Colina & García Mayo, 2009). Most of these studies have dealt with adult populations and have revealed that EFL learners do not make an excessive use of their L1 (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Swain & Lapkin, 2000 in ESL settings, Storch & Aldosari, 2010; Azkarai & García Mayo, 2015 in EFL settings - but see Tognini (2008) and Tognini & Oliver (2012) for notable L1 use in Australian French and FL classrooms). Regarding the functions the L1 serves, adult learners employ their L1 with a metacognitive function, for metatalk, phatics– expressions such asmmm, yeah, ok - and for vocabulary searches. Once more, children are an under-researched group.

Recently, Azkarai and García Mayo (2017) considered this topic by analyzing the oral interaction of 42 Spanish EFL learners attending the same school in a major city in Spain. The learners were in 4th primary grade (9–10 years old) and had started learning English at the age of 4, with 5 hours of instruction per week. They were asked to work in pairs on a spot-the-difference task, which they completed at two testing times (T1 and T2), some under an exact task repetition condition and others under a procedural task repetition condition. The oral interactions of all the dyads were transcribed verbatim using CLAN/CHILDES (McWhinney, 2000). All utterances were codified as c-units (see Foster, Tonkyn & Wigglesworth, 2000), and each c-unit containing any instance of L1 was identified for subsequent analysis. The different functions the L1 served were classified into eight categories: clarification request, confirmation check, lack of knowledge, phatics, repetitions, metacognitive talk, appeal for help and borrowing.

The study showed that L1 use decreased over time as the task was repeated no matter under which condition but the number of different L1 functions remained the same. The children used their L1 mostly for lexical searches and for borrowings at both testing times: they ask for words they do not know in English and/ or use Spanish words as borrowings so that the communicative flow is not interrupted because of gaps in their knowledge. These two functions are clearly connected to the avoidance of breakdown in communication and to make language meaningful (García Mayo & Hidalgo, 2017; Pladevall & Vraciu, 2017). Consider the following example:

> (9) L1 use for lexical search and borrowing
> 1 Luis: *¿cómo se dice hierba?* [how do you say grass?]
> 2 Isabel: *no sé.* [I don't know.]
> 3 Luis: green *hierba* [grass]?
> 4 Isabel: yes.
>
> (Azkarai & García Mayo, 2017: 487)

Luis and Isabel (pseudonyms) are completing the task at T2. Luis does not know how to say 'grass' in English and asks his partner, who does not know either. Luis borrows the corresponding word from Spanish in order to go on with the task.

As mentioned above, TR has been shown to have an impact on the CAF of learners' oral performance. Again, most studies have been conducted with adult participants (Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2011; Saeedi & Kazerooni, 2014, among others) and children are once more an under-researched group. Two recent studies by Sample and Michel (2014) and Bret Blasco (2014) considered CAF in the oral interaction of EFL children from the perspective of Skehan's Trade-off Hypothesis (Skehan, 2009). Skehan's proposal is based on the assumption that humans' attentional capacity is limited and, therefore, how attentional resources are divided during L2 performance will depend on task characteristics. He claims

that performance in CAF "entails competition for attentional resources (1998: 168), in other words, attention devoted to one of the members of the CAF triad may trigger a negative impact on another. Sample and Michel assessed the oral production of 6 Chinese EFL children (mean age 9.5) and found that by the third TR children became familiar with the task and were able to focus their attention on all three CAF areas simultaneously. Bret Blasco (2014) had a larger database, 52 Spanish-Catalan EFL children (9-10 at the onset of the study), who repeated two tasks at four points in time over a two-year period. Her findings showed the children improved complexity and fluency but accuracy decreased upon TR, thus supporting Skehan and Foster's (Extended) Trade-off Hypothesis (2012) which claims that greater fluency will be accompanied by greater accuracy or complexity (but not both). García Mayo, Imaz Agirre and Azkarai (2018) is the most recent study on the effect of TR on CAF with a much larger database. These researchers analyzed the oral production of 120 EFL children paired in 60 dyads. Fifty-four children in 3rd year primary (mean age = 8) and 66 in 4th year primary (mean age = 9.02) completed a spot-the-difference task at two testing times (T1 and T2) and under two conditions: exact task repetition and procedural task repetition. The findings of the study indicated that procedural TR had a positive impact on fluency and accuracy at T2. Specifically, participants in 3rd year were more fluent, whereas learners in 4th year were more accurate. The different outcomes in each measure and in each age group also provided evidence in favor of Skehan's Trade-off hypothesis.

There is no doubt that progress in our knowledge about child interaction in task-based EFL contexts has been made. In general, we could say that research undertaken so far has led to the following tentative conclusions: (i) EFL primary school children, both in mainstream EFL and CLIL settings, are able to negotiate for meaning with age- and proficiency-matched peers. They use the whole repertoire of interactional strategies attested in child and adult ESL studies except for comprehension checks, although other strategies such as acknowledgments and sentence completion show that they care about their partners' production; (ii) Young children are also able to focus on formal aspects of the language, operationalized as LREs, without the teacher's intervention; (iii) Younger children seem to negotiate more than older ones and rely on their L1 to a lesser extent but motivational factors and the easiness of the task, variables that have not been studied in detail yet, need to be considered; (iv) When compared to their EFL counterparts, CLIL children seem to use fewer conversational adjustments possibly because CLIL learners have already gained the necessary language skills to complete the tasks; and (v) TR with young EFL learners seems to be beneficial in fostering more collaborative patterns at least among young (8-9) and old (11-12) children but it is not so clear with the 9-10 range (Pinter, 2007). It also impacts L1 use, which decreases over time. Procedural TR seems to lead to some accuracy gains.

However, there are still many research lines that need to be addressed in order to move the field forward. Some of those will be summarized in the following section.

4. LOOKING FORWARD: WHAT IS LEFT FOR US TO DO

There is a world-wide trend to start the learning of a FL (especially English) at very young ages. This paper has shown that there is some research that has started to document what children actually do when they complete collaborative tasks and that some progress has been made in this line of research. There are, however, many challenges ahead, which should be seen as ways to improve our knowledge about young learners' FL learning opportunities and how to foster them.

There are many variables that are still under-researched regarding the oral interaction among young learners in task-supported classrooms. One of those is *individual differences* such as motivation (Al Khalil, 2016) or engagement (Philp & Duchesne, 2016; Qiu & Lo, 2017). It is very important to determine whether children's motivation will have a clear impact on how the task is completed, whether or not their motivation changes before and after performing a task, whether or not motivation is task-dependent, etc. Task-related motivation in children can be measured with a pre- and post-task motivation thermometer, such as the one designed by Al Khalil (2016) or administering adapted questionnaires with Likert scale items and open questions. Regarding engagement, Philp and Duchesne (2016) have recently considered different types: Cognitive engagement, which involves processes such as sustained attention and mental effort[2], behavioral engagement, which is typically described simply in terms of time spent on the task or participation, how focused learners are on the task, and emotional engagement, defined as motivated involvement during learning activities, that is, enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment as key indicators of this type of engagement. Baralt, Gurzynski-Weiss and Kim (2016) described engagement as a cognitive and/or affective and/or social state. The different types of engagement were identified through indicators developed from their data with adult learners of Spanish as a FL and also post-task questionnaires (see Baralt et al. 2016: 222 for details). To the best of our knowledge, Michell (2012) is the only study that has measured engagement with children learning English as an additional language (EAL) in Australia. She used video recordings of classroom interaction to consider both verbal and non-verbal communication.

A second item that needs to be included in the agenda is the *oral-written connection* in child task-supported interaction, that is, the extent to which child oral interaction has an impact on their written product. As already pointed out by Ortega (2009), there is an overall lack of primary school representation in EFL writing. Among the reasons for this lack of research, Lee (2016) mentions the difficulty in accessing the participants in school contexts and the difficulties teachers face in bringing research in line with their daily teaching routines. We should not forget that for primary school children, oral and written literacy go hand in hand and the former can facilitate the latter if the teacher uses tasks that enable children to develop their ideas, decide on the language they need to express them and collaborate in organizing them into a coherent written text.

Within this line of research, work is needed on the language learning potential of writing (Manchón, 2011). Specifically, research on SLA has shown that collaborative writing is a crucial source of learning as it is through collaboration that meaning is created and knowledge is co-constructed (Swain, 2006). Studies are needed on the impact of children's oral interaction on their collaborative written production. In that sense, tasks that include a written component, such as dictogloss (Wayjryb, 1990), should be studied in more depth. Up to this date, only the study by Shak (2006), with 78 9-12 year old children in the ESL context of Brunei Darussalam, and the study by Calzada Lizarraga (2017), with 50 11-12 year olds in the Spanish EFL context, have been carried out. Both studies reported positive attitudes towards the task but the children did not always focus on the target feature seeded in the dictogloss. Besides, none of the studies assessed whether the LREs generated in the children's interaction were transferred to the written product. Also, although a number of previous studies has looked into the effects of different types on written corrective feedback (CF) in collaborative writing tasks with adult or adolescent learners (García Mayo & Loidi Labandibar, 2017; Hanaoka, 2006; Martínez Esteban & Roca de Larios, 2010; Yang & Zhang, 2010) research on how primary school children collaborate in writing and benefit from CF types such as models and reformulation is basically non-existent in the EFL context. Exception should be made of the work by Coyle and Roca de Larios (2014) with 10-12 year children and García Hernández, Roca de Larios and Coyle (2017) with 11-12 year old children. The first study concluded that models and explicit correction stimulated attention to different aspects of language and the second that proficiency had a crucial role in how learners processed the feedback from the models provided. Clearly, more research along these lines is needed to compare explicit correction with models and reformulations in order to assess the benefits each of those CF types has for primary school children and the characteristics of their interaction when faced with each of those types.

A third item on the research agenda should be the detailed study of the types of dyadic patterns that are established by the children. We should assess whether the well-known patterns identified by Storch (2002 *et passim*) on the basis of her research with adult ESL learners can be maintained for young EFL learners or whether they should be modified on the basis of empirical research with this population. These dyadic patterns can be influenced by pair formation methods. Recent research on adult learners has shown that the pair formation method has an impact on peer interaction and the interactional patterns formed (Gagné & Parks, 2013; Mozaffari, 2017; Storch & Aldosari, 2012). Thus, teacher-assigned pairs seem to generate more LREs than student-selected pairs and there is more off-task behavior in the latter (Mozaffari, 2017). Besides, teacher-assigned pairs seem to outperform student-selected pairs when producing written texts. To the best of our knowledge, only García Mayo and Imaz Agirre (2018) have carried out an exploratory study on this topic with young EFL learners and they revealed that teacher-assigned pairs are more on task than those

self-selected, who seem to engage in more off-task behavior. Another interesting line of research is the study of learners' self-reported opinions about the use of communication strategies such as guessing, paraphrasing, foreignizing and others (see Martínez Adrián, Gallardo del Puerto & Basterrechea, 2017).

Last, but not least, researchers should work on establishing links with heads of schools in order to facilitate access to FL teachers and their students. As Lightbown (2016) stated, "it is essential to recognize the paramount importance of local teachers, students and learning contexts when we seek to "apply" research findings". Access to schools in FL settings is probably the most difficult step in the design of sound research (García Mayo, forthcoming). In this sense, it is the researchers' duty to work on teacher-researcher collaboration projects so as to make teachers aware of how important the data their children provide are for the development of appropriate learning tasks. Erlam (2016) has recently pointed out that teachers themselves acknowledge that the preparation for task-based lessons is very demanding because it is not easy to prepare tasks that are suitable for the learners' level. In that sense, and as already indicated in some studies (Boers, 2017; García Mayo, 2012; Marsden & Kasprowicz, 2017), more research-informed teaching and teacher training is necessary by academics who should make their research findings accessible to non-academic users (see also Wilden & Porsh, 2017).

Oral interaction among peers has been shown to make a positive and unique contribution to learning among adult and adolescent learners in both ESL and EFL contexts as well as among children in ESL contexts. The studies carried out so far in EFL settings with children as participants point to encouraging findings even in contexts where learners have far less exposure to target input and limited class time. A call for more research with this young learner population is made here as it is only with well-designed studies that our findings can be robust and of use to stakeholders and primary school teachers. In those studies, we should also consider Pinter's (2014) suggestion about doing research *with* children rather than *on* children, that is, consider them as co-researchers and listen to their opinions, as some study has already done (see Butler, 2017).

NOTES

1   CLIL is an umbrella term for programs that use the second/foreign language as a medium of instruction. The learners following a CLIL program learn about a subject using the language they are trying to learn. A CLIL methodology is considered valuable because it provides plenty or real and meaningful input to the learners and raises their overall proficiency in the target language (Coyle, 2007: 548).
2   More specifically, "[...] a range of indicators of cognitive engagement in collaborative activities, including questioning; completing peer utterances; exchanging ideas; making evaluative comments; giving directions, explanations, or information; justifying an argument; and making gestures and facial expressions" (Philp & Duchesne, 2016: 53).

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