# Greek preschool teacher's views about language activities in early childhood education during Covid‑19. A chance for change?

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*Abstract*

*The aim of this research is to investigate the views of preschool teachers about their "readiness" for e-learning, the barriers they had faced while using it in early childhood education, the teaching practices during distance learning of language, and the transformations that had to be done in these, their effectiveness, and finally the utilization of the digital tools in the teaching of language after their return to the real classes. Views from ten Greek preschool teachers were collected with semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic content analysis. The results showed that teachers had no "readiness" for distance education and some students have fewer opportunities than others to learn and conquer some skills at home during distance learning. Furthermore, during distance learning the oral language was cultivated naturally and effortlessly, while the cultivation of the written language encountered significant difficulties due to the mediation of the digital tools, according to teachers. But as they seem to acknowledge the power of digital tools, they overcome their initial embarrassment and set aside the difficulties they encountered. Indeed, teachers seem to acknowledge this e-learning teaching experience supplied them with technological skills that could be utilized in similar situations. However, they highlight the need for training in distance learning and mainly how they could effectively integrate the technology in class.*

*Keywords: teaching of language, preschool education, teachers' opinions, pandemic, distance learning, online learning*

## Introduction

The pandemic of the new coronavirus Covid-19 had an impact on the entire planet transforming it significantly. The field of education, facing conditions of urgent teaching with Information and Communications Technology (ICT) taking over and producing the guarantees in education, created the necessary conditions for the utilization of distance education at the school level (Samuelsson et al. 2020). Although school distance learning can work as compensatory, complementary or self-sufficient (Keegan 2001) of formal education, for preschool education concerns arise regarding the role of the use of forms of distance education by preschool teachers (Pyun 2021).

## Theoretical background

Concerns about distance education and its applicability to the preschool setting are mainly related to the *"readiness"* of preschool teachers to adapt to the new educational conditions, the willingness of students to attend the new educational reality, the parental involvement, and of course the lack of equipment (Musthofiyah et al. 2021, Pyun 2021). Furthermore, preschool teachers should consider more issues when providing digital tools to children (Apostolou 2019, Muhdi 2021), as they get bored easily if what is provided is not interesting and innovative for them. However, during the pandemic, preschool teachers were forced to use ICT in the educational process, some only through communication with students and others by incorporating it into their teaching interventions, to a lesser

or greater extent, proposals made by the curriculum and facilitated by various ICT utilization scenarios (Pyun 2021, Samuelsson et al. 2020). In fact, many of them, at the same time, participated in training programs for this purpose.

Taking into account the criteria regarding the suitability of the content, the age and the developmental needs of the children (Ke et al. 2019, Foti 2020), preschool teachers should be consistent in application and the provision of material in the classroom preparing learning scenarios that will mobilize the student and maintain his undiminished interest during the distance learning. Within this framework of considering the learning process in kindergarten, the variety of educational media, the ease of use of technological tools and the multiple principles of learning and teaching gives a qualitative dimension to the distance learning. For language learning in particular, the pedagogical approach of literacy in pre-school education is determined by the current Curriculum for Kindergarten (MoE/PI 2003) which refers to the development of oral and written speech within a theoretical framework based on the theory of emerging literacy and the constructivism according to the approaches of Ferreiro & Teberosky (1982). In this context, emphasis is placed on early language stimulation, which has great importance for reading development and children's literacy learning because learning occurs through actions that have meaning for them and a clear purpose (Apostolou & Stellakis 2019). Preschool teachers, adopting a broad definition of the concept of literacy and its practices, invent and experiment with various practices that lead to the development of the learning process and the cultivation of oral and written language (Dafermou et al. 2006).

In the new Curriculum for Preschool Education (IEP 2021) the thematic units *"Language"* and *"Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)"* have a key role and are the basis for all didactic fields. Communication has an important place in the preschool setting curriculum with the Thematic Unit of Language adopting the approach of multiplication and in particular of critical literacy, in which emphasis is placed on multimodal texts and the integration of various semiotic systems for the production of meaning and effective communication. In the context of everyday situations and authentic experiences (IEP 2021).

According to the Curriculum for Preschool Education, *"Language"* focuses on the development of basic skills for oral, written, and multilingual communication, which are evaluated as very important for the effective participation of children in the school and wider socio-cultural environment (IEP 2021). In the same context of approaching the teaching practice and the learning process, the *"Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)"* moves in the Curriculum for Preschool Education, emphasizing the development of skills related to the familiarity of children with the digital environment and the development of information management skills to meet different communication needs and helping children to develop critical thinking and to transfer their learning experiences beyond the boundaries of the classroom (IEP 2021).

In recent years, more and more preschool teachers use digital devices, but also have been trained to use them in the educational process (Eleftheriadi et al. 2021, Kolovou et al. 2021, Nikolopoulou 2020). However, pre-pandemic research suggests a non-systematic use of ICT by a small group of preschool teachers (Eleftheriadi et al. 2021, Nikolopoulou 2020) while highlighting many barriers to their use (Eleftheriadi et al. 2021, Nikolopoulou 2020). In view of the Curriculum according to which the goal of education today is to create learning environments that familiarize children with a variety of tools for processing and exchanging information in order to meet the challenges of modern social reality and to decode the world around them, the question that arises concerns the *"readiness"* of preschool teachers. Furthermore, it concerns the willingness of preschool teachers to willingness to train, to collaborate and then to make the necessary and appropriate transformations to adapt to the emerging new conditions of teaching practice which seems to signal and include the greater or lesser use of digital tools and distance learning.

## Research objective

In this study we focused on preschool teachers' views about teaching practices for the cultivation of oral and written language before and after the pandemic trying to answer the question whether and how the experience gained by preschool teachers from the language's teaching in distance learning during the pandemic indicates their teaching practices in the period after the pandemic.

## Methodology
### Research procedure

This research was carried out in October 2021, and it followed a qualitative methodology, which allows researchers to analyze facts holistically and in depth. Semi-structured interviews with preschool teachers were carried out to identify their practices (Creswell 2016). The interviews were conducted individually, and the interview protocol (see table 1) was based on the objective of the research. The interview protocol was tested on two individuals before the main research to review the interview and make possible corrections. The analysis of the interviews did not indicate possible difficulties and ambiguities in interpreting of the questions, so, the interview protocol was not revised. Moreover, preschool teachers were excluded from the main research. Table 1 presents the final interview questions.

The interviews consisted of two parts and 9 questions in total. The first part was about the preschool teachers' and the children's "readiness" for e-learning, the barriers they encountered in its implementation, the contribution/attitude of parents during distance learning, the teaching practices they used during distance learning and the transformations in these practices, their effectiveness and finally the utilization of the digital tools in the teaching practice after their return to the real classes. The second part was the demographic profile, including their gender, their studies, their teaching experience and their previous relevant training in ICT and in teaching language, and the number of children in their classes.

**Table 1:** Interview protocol

**First part**
- How "ready" do you think you were for distance education and how "ready" were your students?
- Are there any barriers while using distance education in early childhood education?
- What is the contribution/attitude of parents of preschool students during distance learning?
- Which are your teaching practices for language approach during distance education?
- Do you need to have any transformations in your teaching practices for language approach during distance education?
- Have you noticed any benefits to the students from the use of digital tools for your teaching language practices during distance education?
- Do you utilize any digital tools (from distance education) in your teaching practice after the return to the real classes?

**Second part**
- Preschool teacher's gender, studies and number of children in their classes.
- How many years of work experience do you have in early childhood education?
- Have you received any training on ICTs in the teaching and learning process in preschool or in teaching language?

## Participants

The purposive sample consisted of 10 Greek female preschool teachers from the Western Greece Region. The interviewees were chosen with the criterion of participating in both periods when the pandemic forced the closure of schools and distance learning. Table 2 presents the demographic information of the participants. In particular, one of the teachers teaches in a private school, and the rest are in public kindergartens, only 4 of them hold a postgraduate degree, only 3 of them have been trained in ICT and only 2 of them have been trained in teaching language.

**Table 2:** Demographic characteristics of the sample and characteristics of settings

| Teacher code | Studies | ICT training | Training in teaching language | Years of teaching experience | Number of children in class |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| PT1 | Graduate | No | No | 11-15 | 19 |
| PT2 | Post graduate | No | Yes | 11-15 | 12 |
| PT3 | Post graduate | Yes | No | 1-5 | 22 |
| PT 4 | Post graduate | No | No | 11-15 | 15 |
| PT 5 | Graduate | Yes | No | 6-10 | 9 |
| PT 6 | Graduate | No | No | 16-20 | 16 |
| PT 7 | Graduate | No | No | 1-5 | 23 |
| PT 8 | Graduate | No | No | 31-35 | 14 |
| PT 9 | Graduate | No | No | 16-20 | 18 |
| PT 10 | Post graduate | Yes | Yes | 16-20 | 9 |

**Results**

Qualitative data were analyzsed using thematic content analysis to develop relevant codes, categories, and topics (Bryman 2016). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The analysis of the results revealed themes such as: the preschool teachers' "readiness" for e-learning and barriers they had faced while using it in early childhood education, the teaching practices during distance learning of language and the transformations that had to be done in these, their effectiveness and finally the utilization of the digital tools in the teaching practice of language after their return to the real classes.

**Teachers' "readiness" for e-learning and barriers to the use of digital tools and platforms during the period of mandatory e-learning in early childhood education**

All the interviewees had already participated in both periods of e-learning during pandemic in the kindergarten and stated that they had no "readiness" (limited access to technology to manage online classes) for distance education. Even those who said they were familiar with distance education did not know the platforms (e.g., WebEx, e-me, E-class) proposed and provided by the Ministry of Education. Interviewees seemed to use WebEx mainly, while many of them referred to the use of alternative digital tools ("Padlet", "Wakletet", "Wordwall", "Sway", etc.) that they themselves knew from their personal uses and evaluated them as "easier". Also, help and mutual support between them is a common opinion amongst the teachers, while they reported with more frustration on the lack or insufficient training by the Ministry of Education, highlighting significantly the need for its existence. Specifically, one teacher stated that:

> PT 1: "No teacher or student was ready for distance education. Personally, I did not know about the WebEx, e-me, E-class platforms. However, I used WebEx and Padlet, because I had to, because somehow the process had to be done."

The teachers also referred to the barriers usually exist while using e-learning in early childhood education: the lack of equipment or internet connection in schools and for students too (weak, slow or no Internet access at home, simultaneous use of fewer tools by older siblings for their own educational

requirements), inability to use digital tools by the students of the kindergarten, the presence and the supporting role of the parents was necessary, continually reduced interest of the students as they prefer the direct contact and communication with their teacher and their classmates were referred as the most critical factors. More specific, a teacher stated that:

> PT 4: "At first, most of our students were wary and very surprised. There was no familiarity. The difficulties they faced were mainly related to the lack of tools, they had difficult access to them as their older brothers (elementary school) used them simultaneously for their lessons. Although the children participated in the educational process actively, showing a keen interest as they seemed to miss school and their friends, they used the tools of distance education themselves to a lesser extent, as they didn't know how to use them. Almost all the parents helped them by explaining or by using themselves the digital tools during the process."

**Teaching language practices during e- learning in kindergarten and their transformations**

Almost all the interviewees stated that during distance learning they tried to do several literacy activities, through online tools (e.g., WebEx, e-me, E-class). Specifically, one teacher stated that:

> PT 2: "I did a lot of literacy activities through WebEx during e-learning."

In particular, according to the preschool teachers, they used digital tools mainly for the cultivation of oral language and less for written speech, especially especially those who mentioned previous education and training in language teaching. More specifically, these teachers stated that:

> PT 2: "We read many fairy tales, painted and "created" many stories, put pictures in order, matched pictures and words etc., mainly emphasizing the enrichment of oral speech."

> PT 10: "Indicative language activities with the use of digital tools are the description of images, the watching of fairy tales, the narration, the writing or copying of words related to the subject or everyday life, e.g., date, season, words along with their painting, name spelling. Also, search for words with the same syllables or letters at the beginning, separate syllables with claps."

Furthermore, as the preschool teachers mentioned the oral language was cultivated naturally and effortlessly with the communication through the screen by using the camera and the microphone, while the cultivation of the written language encountered significant difficulties due to the mediation of the digital tools. One teacher stated that:

> PT 7: "During the pandemic I tried to cultivate mainly the oral speech. I spoke orally anyway from the moment we communicated even through screens and microphones. I used WebEx, E-class, Padlet and Whiteboard for the cultivation of written language. It was a bit fun at first, they turned on the microphone and said several things. Then, they used the digital tools and their capabilities and they found some digital activities more interesting than the ones we do in our real classrooms. They loved the «wheels», the «hangers», the «picture puzzles», and various such language games that were adapted with digital tools."

Many teachers noticed the barriers they had faced during pandemic at their activities for oral language and more specifically for written language and the transformations they had been done in order to adapt those activities to the needs and conditions of distance education. The difficulties of adapting several language activities to the conditions of the distance learning and the needs of the individualized teaching that arose but they were difficult to deal with were the critical factors. Teachers stated that:

> PT 3: "I adapted all language activities to distance education because I had previous training with these digital tools. In real classroom we could change what arises and needs transformation immediately, as we have the experience and of course the time to do it, but

in distance education you cannot easily adapt and transform an activity as you have neither the time nor the familiarity with digital tools and of course you are exposed to the presence of parents. However, I had to make many changes even in the «classroom routines» activities. And the children were asking *why do we change this, why don't we do it like in our classroom?* In the course of distance education, of course, they themselves understood the need to transform many things in order to be functional and efficient."

PT 4: "Since there was no possibility of proximity, I had to simplify the material and the requirements that arose during its use, as when something arose during the distance training it was very difficult to solve. So, I had to anticipate all the possible changes and modifications that I might need to have made. This was extremely time consuming and extremely demanding for us preschool teachers who have not learned to work like this, but what we do in our classrooms is to modify and handle our material with the students according to their wishes, interests and requirements of the didactic act."

In particular, for the written language and its activities, the preschool teachers reported that there were many changes and transformations that needed to be made. One teacher stated that:

PT 2: "The children were asked to write each letter first on the screen and then with different materials they had at home to write it in other ways. The difference in this case in relation to direct teaching was the use of the screen. In general, the use of digital tools signaled change, goals and activities remained more or less the same."

More specifically teachers with previous training in distance learning stated that:

PT 5: "I adapted the activities to the possibilities given to me through technology and distance. I used a lot of digital material (platforms, software, internet activities), which I would not use in lifelong teaching."

PT 10: "From the beginning I adapted my lesson to the new data, I made sure to work well with the parents, I used a lot of digital material (platforms, software, internet activities) which I would not use in my real classroom and I chose those language activities that I thought would be of interest to the children, as they would be «different» and more «attractive» from what we did in real classrooms."

Regarding the effectiveness of the language activities carried out during the distance learning, the preschool teachers referred to the initial enthusiasm and gradually reduced interest of the children. More specific, teachers stated that:

PT 3: "One big difference I find between face-to-face schooling and distance education is the different rhythms of understanding and consolidation that each child has. In life the preschool teacher is always by his side to explain, help, describe and understand. In distance learning, distance on the one hand and the technical difficulties that often arose greatly hampered this way of managing the process of consolidation and understanding."

PT 4: "The activities of distance education were effective. The participation and interest of the children was constantly increasing. Not so much in oral activities, e.g., description of images, storytelling, watching a story/fairy tale as the majority of these activities were usual for our students, but mainly in activities new to them (e.g., wheel, hangers, crossword puzzles, etc.). Such language activities developed by colleagues and were ubiquitous on the internet aroused the children's interest and kept their participation active."

**The utilization of the digital tools in the teaching practice of language after their return to the real classes**

Regarding the utilization of the digital tools and the material they used during distance learning in their teaching practice of language after the return to the real classes' preschool teachers reported

occasional and focused use of some activities mainly for the cultivation of the written language that seemed to excite the children. Parallelly, some teachers declared readiness to utilize their experience in distance learning for a similar situation. More specific, teachers with no previous training at distance learning tools or at language teaching, but with a great deal of teaching experience in general, stated that:

> PT 6: "Although I had a hard time with distance learning mainly due to technical difficulties and my unfamiliarity with the computer and digital tools (I also have a fear of them) I now use some activities that I used exclusively in distance learning. I do it mainly to mobilize the interest of children, as I saw from them great acceptance and interest in distance education. Moreover, the current experience helped me to think of teaching approaches more suitable for future similar situations."

> PT 8: "I have included in my teaching some activities that I used in distance education. I use «Wordwall», as well as a corresponding whiteboard on the tablet I have in my class. My children also ask for them, they remember them from last year and often they often mention them to me and ask for them. I try as much as I can to adapt them to the teaching practice and to integrate them to the extent that I see that the children are interested and mobilize their interest as something innovative and pioneering but also as a different way of approaching knowledge and teaching."

One kindergarten teacher characteristically stated that children even today, during face-to-face learning, seek out activities that piqued their interest during distance learning. She, also, stated that she does not choose them, as she prefers activities related to the cultivation of oral speech and the familiarization of children with the written word through direct and more experiential activities.

> PT 9: "The truth is that our students now in the classroom, still ask for some activities which we did during the distance education, but I do not choose them as I consider that in the face-to-face teaching of the language the cultivation of the spoken word and the acquaintance of the child with the written word are paramount (e.g., name writing, copying words, writing stories, etc.), so I choose more direct and more experiential activities".

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate preschool teachers' views about teaching practices for the cultivation of oral and written language before and after the pandemic.

Concerning their practices during the pandemic, preschool teachers stated clearly that they had no "readiness" for distance education (Musthofiyah et al. 2021). Furthermore, previous research indicates that socio-economically disadvantaged students have fewer opportunities than their more advantaged peers to learn and conquer some skills at home (Hoskins & Janmaat 2019) during distance learning. Many studies stated as the most important barriers for distance learning «not having the same digital access» for all students and of course the lack of digital tools at home learning environment (Andrew et al. 2020; Hanushek & Woessmann 2020). In our study, at the same way, because of this lack of digital tools, preschool teachers seemed to be trying to help their students by providing tablets to many of the most disadvantaged families and by communicating with them to pursue them to participate in the new learning experience. As with face-to-face schooling, the pandemic also seems to have amplified inequalities in education. However, as the statements of some interviewees showed, technology can introduce flexible ways of providing educational services, so that we do not leave anyone behind and use the resources effectively. That is why it is critical to engage partners as success can only be achieved when governments, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders work towards a common goal.

Regarding the practices of preschool teachers for teaching language during distance learning, the oral language was cultivated naturally and effortlessly, while the cultivation of the written language encountered significant difficulties due to the mediation of the digital tools. The lack of relevant research makes it difficult to interpret this result. Although, the teachers once again highlighted the importance of language in their teaching verifying the fact that *"Language"* having a key role in the Curriculum focuses on the development of basic skills for oral, written and multilingual communication, which are considered very important for the effective participation of children in the school and wider socio-political environment (IEP 2021, UNESCO 2017). In this context, teachers, pointing out the difficulties they encountered, referred to the transformations of the activities in general and more specifically at language activities that had to be done in order to adapt to the particular circumstances and the didactic requirements (EACEA 2011, Westerveld et al. 2015) of distance education.

Furthermore, regarding the currently period, after the return to face-to-face schooling, some preschool teachers seemed to occasionally utilize the digital tools for teaching of language focusing mainly for the cultivation of the written language. Teachers seem to acknowledge the power of digital tools to motivate the children and to encourage them to participate more in learning procedures (Eleftheriadi et al. 2021). Finally, teachers seem to acknowledge this distance learning experience supplied them with technological skills that could be utilized in similar situations (Gomes 2021, Samuelsson et al. 2020). In this frame, more research is required to determine the technological benefits for the preschool teachers and the pupils from this emergency situation during the pandemic. Moreover, stakeholders could formulate policies that support teachers to acquire technological and pedagogical skills that could lead them to be adapted to a new era. An era in which teachers should be ready to use digital tools in teaching various subject matters in-person or/and online (Short et al. 2021). Therefore, now more than ever, the educational policy should organize training programs focused on teaching using specific technologies in specific ways (Lavidas et al. 2021, Theodoropoulou et al 2021).

**Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the changes it has brought about in education, at all levels, is an experience and a "springboard" for a possible change that may involve new teaching practices, the use of new digital tools, but also some new, more targeted, training courses, etc. In this new educational framework, teachers and students, based on the experience gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, seem to have the will and the need to be more "ready", to be more educated on new practices and tools of distance education, as they realized their usefulness and their necessity.

In particular, in pre-school education, preschool teachers as they were "forced" to use digital tools and for which, as it seemed, they were not "ready", today, and according to the results of our research, seem to overcome their initial embarrassment and set aside the difficulties they encountered. Preschool teachers seem to try to organize themselves more systematically, to pursue learning by utilizing technology in many dimensions of the educational process. Preschool teachers seem to try to organize themselves more systematically, to pursue learning by utilizing technology in many dimensions of the educational process. As they seem to acknowledge the power of digital tools, they also seem to overcome their initial embarrassment and set aside the difficulties they encountered. Indeed, teachers seem to acknowledge this e-learning teaching experience supplied them with technological skills that could be utilized in similar situations. However, they highlight the need for training in distance learning and mainly how they could effectively integrate the technology in class (Lavidas et al. 2021). The urgent need for training in both distance education and especially in language teaching during distance education was significantly stated by most of the interviewees. In general, in Greece many researches concerning the perceptions of preschool teachers referred to the need they propose for training on

language teaching issues (Apostolou & Stellakis 2019, Apostolou et al. 2020), to be more effective themselves but also the teaching process to have the expected results.

In this context, "blended teaching" (Short et al. 2021) seems to be for preschool teachers' an important part of the ongoing teaching practices that they choose today in their effort to transform and integrate digital learning activities into front-line teaching activities. The process of transforming and adapting new teaching practices is a broader process based on the ability to find, access and use information, and on interacting with other users and navigating the Internet and ICT environment safely and responsibly, starting mainly from respecting the rights of students to provide them with many, different and essential learning experiences (UNESCO 2021).

The main limitation of this research is the small sample size and therefore the weakness of generalizing the research findings. Furthermore, the fact that teachers who participated in our study were requested to declare their views is an issue that could lead to response bias (Lavidas & Gialamas 2019). Further research should be carried out with a greater sample in Greece as well as other similar studies worldwide to confirm these findings.

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