

# Political, Pedagogical and Research Insights into Early Language Education

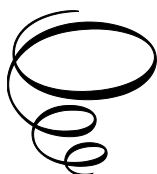


# Political, Pedagogical and Research Insights into Early Language Education

Edited by

Hacer Hande Uysal

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Political, Pedagogical and Research Insights into Early Language  
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Recent Trends and Challenges in Early Language Teaching Hacer Hande Uysal	
<b>Section I: Planning and Policy in Early Language Teaching and Teacher Education</b>	
Chapter 1 .....	10
To Teach or Not to Teach? English in Primary Schools Fiona Copland	
Chapter 2 .....	19
Globalization and the Teaching of Foreign Languages to Young Learners: Macro and Micro Perspectives Yasemin Kirkgoz	
Chapter 3 .....	26
Continuous Professional Development of Early Language Teachers: The Case of SBATEYL Hacer Hande Uysal	
Chapter 4 .....	38
The Challenges and Journeys of New Zealand Primary School Teachers Offering Languages to Young Learners Christine Biebricher	
Chapter 5 .....	45
Injecting TEYL Courses into the Curriculum of Primary School Education Programs Fatih Gungor	

## **Section II: Theoretical and Research Insights into Teaching Languages to Young Learners**

Chapter 6 .....	58
Cognitive and Linguistic Aspects of Bilingual Language Acquisition in Early Childhood	
Belma Haznedar	
Chapter 7 .....	70
Multimodal Representations for Inclusion and Success	
Magdalen Philips	
Chapter 8 .....	82
How to Do Research with Young and Very Young Learners?	
Muge Tavil and Selmin Soylemez	
Chapter 9 .....	95
A Micro-analytic Investigation of Embodied Vocabulary Teaching in Young Learner Classrooms	
Hatice Ergul	
Chapter 10 .....	106
Strategy Training with Children: Is It Too Good To Be True?	
Elif Eken and Esim Gursoy	
Chapter 11 .....	123
A Comparative Study of Instruction Types and Reading Comprehension for Young Learners	
Kaveh Jalilzadeh, Ghasem Modarresi, and Hassan Rouhani	
Chapter 12 .....	133
Practices and Challenges of Teaching EFL to Young Learners: Insights from Practicum Stakeholders	
Anil Soylemez	

## **Section III: Pedagogical Considerations in Early Language Teaching and Learning**

Chapter 13 .....	144
How to Create Technology-enhanced Language Classrooms for Young Learners: A Practical Guideline	
Asuman Asik	

Chapter 14 .....	156
Pedagogical Suggestions to Optimize the Creative Potential among Young Learners	
Olena Salaviva	
Chapter 15 .....	163
Let Young Learners Experience the Shakesperience: Critical Reading and Creative Writing Ideas for Teaching Shakespeare	
Hayriye Ulas Taraf	
Chapter 16 .....	175
Don't Forget to Let Them Talk While They Write	
David Byrd	





# INTRODUCTION

## RECENT TRENDS AND CHALLENGES IN EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING

HACER HANDE UYSAL

With the influence of globalization and the increasing need for a common language for international communication, English has become the lingua franca in the world and has started to enjoy the advantage of higher prestige and popularity in many domains, including education (Crystal, 2003; Shin and Crandall, 2014). As the world's new lingua franca, English has played a key role in language-in-education policies of many countries, particularly in the expanding circle, while deciding which language to include as a foreign language in school settings and how to teach it (Kaplan and Baldauf, 1997; Lambert, 1999). As a result, English has been included as the first and sometimes the only foreign language in the education systems of many countries (Garton, Copland, and Burns, 2011).

Due to the global developments, the demand for early language learning has also increased; thus, a series of government reforms took place around the world to introduce languages, mainly English, to children starting from earlier ages (Enever and Moon, 2009; Garton and Copland, 2018; Haznedar and Uysal, 2010; Kirkgoz, 2010; Mourão and Lourenço, 2015; Nikolov and Curtain, 2000; Nunan, 2003; Spolsky and Moon, 2012). The rising status of English, as it is associated with better education and increased opportunities for employment, has further fueled the trend for early language learning (Enever and Moon, 2009; Gimenez, 2009; Shin and Crandall, 2014). This spread of English to primary-level education has resulted in five hundred million children learning English through compulsory schooling around the world (Knagg and Ellis, 2012).

In addition, the belief that younger is better in language learning also contributed to the rapid developments in governmental planning and policy, which led to the introduction of English as a compulsory subject at primary schools in various contexts. From a theoretical and research perspective, although there have been controversies around the argument that there is a

critical or sensitive period for optimal acquisition of a second language or reaching native-like proficiency (e.g., Lenneberg, 1967; Penfield and Roberts, 1959; Singleton, 2005), early language learning was often reported to have cognitive and neurological benefits for children in general (e.g., Haznedar, 2010; Haznedar in this volume; Johnson and Newport, 1989). An early start is also reported to have many other advantages for children, such as preparing optimal conditions for language learning through increased length of learning time, which results in better fluency and pronunciation, higher cultural awareness and intercultural competence, less anxiety and higher motivation, and improved mental flexibility and social skills (e.g., Johnstone, 2009; Read, 2003; Shin and Crandall, 2014).

From a more practical position, on the other hand, despite widespread government initiatives to start language education at an early age, language teaching for young learners has faced serious challenges in classrooms. The proponents of the ‘the younger, the better’ approach suggest that certain methodological requirements should first be met in young learner classrooms to reach the maximum pedagogical benefits of young age in language learning (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow, 2000). However, early language teachers around the world are often not aware of the special needs of young language learners and the appropriate methodologies to teach young learners (e.g., Copland, Garton, and Burns, 2014; Enever and Moon, 2009; Nikolov and Mihaljevic-Djigunovic, 2011). One reason is that government planning took place too fast before preparing the necessary infrastructure and teacher training activities, which resulted in a shortage of language teachers who are well-equipped to teach young learners. Instead, regular elementary classroom teachers were often assigned to teach languages to children. However, these teachers were not ready to undertake this task as they fall short in terms of their English proficiency level and specific pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach languages to young learners (Curtain and Pesola, 2000; Garton, Copland, and Burns, 2011; Haznedar and Uysal, 2010; Hu, 2005; Kirkgöz, 2009).

Given these problems, this book mainly aims to contribute to the discussions of how to achieve more productive and successful early language education in the world. The book covers three major dimensions in the early language education area: The political issues, the research for theory building, and the pedagogical considerations for better foreign language teaching to young learners. The book includes 17 chapters grouped around these three main sections. The first section presents an overview of how governmental planning and policy regarding early language teaching affected different educational contexts around the world, discusses the issues and problems faced while implementing the policy

initiatives, and suggests solutions for future planning and policymaking. The second section offers some insights from research studies around the world, discusses the implications for young learner classrooms, and gives suggestions for further research for scholars working in this field. And finally, the third section brings together various classroom applications and classroom-driven pedagogical implications for language teachers of young learners.

In the first section, in Chapter 1, Copland discusses the global spread of teaching English in elementary schools and whether this offers advantages or disadvantages for children and their teachers. She talks about the challenges teachers face and describes the necessary conditions that should be prepared for the effective teaching of languages for children. In Chapter 2, Kirkgoz discusses the spread of English as a means of wider communication and the considerable impact of globalization on language policies that introduced English as a foreign language in primary schools. She discusses the problems faced during the policy implementation phases and highlights the need for teacher professional development opportunities to apply the ideal macro-level language policy into micro-level classroom teaching for effective language education. In Chapter 3, Uysal lays out the problems in the current practices of professional development activities for language teachers. In light of the literature and based on teacher needs, she suggests an effective teacher education plan. She presents a web-based in-service education program prepared to educate early language teachers under the SBATEYL project funded by the European Commission as a model. This comprehensive professional education program introduces new trends in early language teaching by bringing together the recent theoretical developments and innovative pedagogical practices and activities developed by primary school teachers around Europe through ten training modules. In Chapter 4, Biebricher further discusses the challenges faced by primary school teachers in New Zealand due to the fact that they were not trained in teaching foreign languages, but suddenly found themselves in increasingly diverse linguistic and cultural teaching contexts. She introduces a case study in which Mandarin was introduced to young learners and reports on a year-long professional development pedagogy programme based on communicative and task-based language teaching tailored to the participating teachers' needs and context. She describes the teachers' journey of becoming language teachers, the effects of the professional development activity, teachers' approaches to language teaching, their beliefs, attitudes, and self-perception as teachers, and the struggles they went through in the process to define their new identity. In Chapter 5, Gungor discusses the problems that result from injecting TEYL courses into the curriculum of primary school

education programs in the Turkish education system despite the lack of teachers equipped with the skills and knowledge to teach English to young learners. He describes a pilot teacher training activity that involved initiating a Foreign Language Teaching (to Young Learners) course at the Elementary School Education Programs in some universities. These courses aimed at preparing teachers in terms of language proficiency, child pedagogy, and early language teaching methodology, and the pre-service elementary school teachers were interviewed to get their opinions about these courses at the end of their training.

In the second section, in Chapter 6, Haznedar presents an overview of the cognitive and linguistic aspects of bilingual language acquisition in early childhood. She discusses whether the experience of learning two or more languages during early childhood may provide the child with any cognitive benefits or lead to confusion and difficulty based on recent studies in childhood bilingualism. In Chapter 7, Magdalen Philips first introduces the current situation of language learning for young learners in England in which teachers mainly rely on written, rather than ephemeral auditory forms. She suggests that this often results in poor pronunciation, which subsequently threatens their comprehension and potentially results in demotivation; therefore, teachers should make use of children's heightened sensitivity to language phonology and strengthen their brain's pathways for aural (spoken) language. She reports the findings of a case study ACs tested users' recall of spoken sounds and comprehension through reordering depictions into new sentences and found that the depictions may constitute a multimodal literacy for establishing speaking skills and recall before orthographic forms are tackled at a later stage. In Chapter 8, Tavil and Soylemez discuss the recent interest in research in the field of teaching languages to young learners. They point out the possible problems of conducting experimental studies with children in terms of their being valid and reliable. They point out the need for new research approaches and tools specifically appropriate for working with young learners, such as the use of participatory activities such as using drawings, photographs, music, and storytelling for data collection. The chapter explores the epistemological, methodological, and practical aspects of implementing the participatory approach to research in early learners' classrooms to incorporate children's perspectives into research. In Chapter 9, Ergul reports on a corpus study which describes the interactional unfolding of embodiment in vocabulary teaching activities in young learner classrooms using conversation analysis methodology, with a specific focus on how pre-service English teachers use embodied resources while introducing new vocabulary items. In Chapter 10, Eken and Gursöy explore the effect of communication strategy training on

learners' speaking strategy use when communicating in L2 via survey and classroom observation tally instruments before and after the intervention. The results revealed that the experimental group showed a statistically significant increase in their speaking strategy use when compared to the control group. Classroom observation results showed that the students improved their ability to handle communication problems due to their insufficient language competence and developed positive feelings towards participation in learning activities. In Chapter 11, Jalilzadeh, Modarresi, and Rouhani compare translation-based, meaning-based, and hint-based instruction tasks in young learner classrooms for reading comprehension. The study revealed that meaning-based tasks facilitated reading comprehension, increased motivation, and problem-solving skills. In chapter 12, Anil Soylemez presents a study which aimed to understand the nature of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to young learners in an EFL practicum context from the triad stakeholders' (pre-service teachers, cooperating teachers, and university supervisors) point of view through focus group interviews, in-class observations, and a survey examining the priority of teaching practices and perceived challenges of teaching EFL to young learners. The findings provided the emerging themes of the perceived common practices and challenges of teaching EFL to young learners. The study provided a context-bound and exploratory perspective with reflections on teaching EFL to young learners in addition to the stakeholders' perceptions of effective teaching practices, revealing the determining factors causing conflicts in EFL teacher education programs and practicum practices.

In section three, in Chapter 13, Asik explains ways for effective integration of technology into young learner classrooms as we are in an age of technology and working with young learners who are digital natives. She also presents a practical guideline, and specific tools teachers can use in their classes while integrating technology into the classes. In Chapter 14, Olena Salaviva emphasizes the special characteristics and needs of young learners and discusses how to utilize creative potential among them through asking relevant and meaningful questions that are of great value not only to their thinking but creative potential as well. She reports the findings of a study that examines how teachers' improved questioning impacts students' reasoning and questioning accordingly and suggests that teachers should create an environment that would provoke children's natural tendency to explore the world by asking efficient and reasonable questions. In Chapter 15, Ulas Taraf suggests creating a literacy-rich environment for ESL/EFL young learners, which would enrich children's language use, enhance their critical reading and creative writing skills, encourage them to speak and act

out through story-telling activities, and increase their motivation and interest. She states that reading Shakespeare's plays would be most likely an excellent experience for children and offers ideas on how to relate Shakespeare and his plays to young learners of English. She introduces several resources available to help teachers teach Shakespeare to children and promote students' critical reading and creative writing skills. In Chapter 16, Byrd emphasizes the importance of writing skills for children. In order to write, students must have listened to or read material upon which to base their writing tasks. He suggests ways to present the listening and reading materials to young language learners and then offers activities for teachers to help learners create a polished piece of writing through a useful tool: talking while developing both content and mechanical writing skills.

Overall, this book first presents the current macro-situations regarding the governmental language policy and planning in various contexts around the world, combined with micro-situations from young learner classrooms. Then, pedagogical and cognitive benefits of teaching languages to young learners are discussed, and practical suggestions are offered to maximize these age-related benefits through effective teaching of language skills in a holistic manner, integrating technology, using literature, and taking advantage of the natural characteristics and tendencies of children, such as their enthusiasm to explore the world, their digital nativeness, creativity, and critical questioning while teaching languages. The book finally explores the prospects of early language education through research studies conducted with all stakeholders, such as teachers, students, and teacher trainers, and aims to contribute to the theory building regarding early language teaching at the primary level. Therefore, this book also aims to contribute to the knowledge-base and practices of both pre- and in-service language teachers in diverse settings, researchers in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, early language teaching and learning communities, and teacher trainers.

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## **SECTION I**

# **PLANNING AND POLICY IN EARLY LANGUAGE TEACHING AND TEACHER EDUCATION**

# CHAPTER 1

## TO TEACH OR NOT TO TEACH? ENGLISH IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

FIONA COPLAND

### **Introduction**

The number of countries now offering the English language to primary school children could be the biggest international phenomenon in education (Johnstone, 2009). There are a number of reasons for this change, but globalisation is often considered to be a major factor (Copland and Garton, 2014). Specifically, there is an expectation that countries must trade internationally in order to stay competitive. International trade requires international communication, and for many, this is done through English (See Kubota, 2013, who presents evidence of other buoyant lingua francas in international business). Other aspects of globalisation, such as cultural exchange, travel, music, sport, have also embraced English to a greater or lesser extent. Several scholars have suggested that the rise of English as an international language has not happened by chance (e.g., Phillipson, 1992, 2006) and that countries where English is used as a first language, e.g., the USA and the UK, have the most to gain from the global adoption of English. Nonetheless, many governments have taken the decision to include English in primary school curricula in state education in order to prepare their citizens to take their place in a world where it is believed that communication in English is common.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether the investment in primary English is worthwhile. Although Enever (see Garton and Copland, 2018) has argued that ‘the horse has bolted’ in this regard (i.e., it is too late to change policy), there are countries that have not mandated English in the primary curriculum (e.g., Argentina, Brazil) and so a discussion is important. Furthermore, education policies are constantly in flux as governments seek to ensure the countries they govern remain safe and prosperous: reversing

English language learning policies are not, therefore, inconceivable. Indeed, South Korea has recently mandated the cessation of English classes in the first and second grades (Ghani, 2018). It should also be noted that the tendency has been to introduce English in the upper primary school, from age 9/10, when children have developed cognitive skills and can begin to bring these to bear on language learning. However, more recently, the trend has been to teach English in lower primary, from the age of 5/6. Again, this is not universal, and so it is reasonable to consider the pros and cons of an early start, which is where this discussion is situated.

My focus is on children from 5-9 years old in state-funded education, which how most children globally are schooled. I call this early English language learning (EELL). To begin, I will introduce the arguments for and against an early start from the second language acquisition perspective. Then I will consider motivational aspects before discussing equity and practical and pedagogic issues.

### **The earlier, the better: The SLA perspective**

There is a common belief that the earlier a child starts to learn a second language, the more likely it is that the child will be successful. This belief derives from how young children learn their first language: most are competent by the age of 5 with a large vocabulary and a strong grasp of the grammatical system (Indeed, children brought up bilingually from birth may well have this knowledge in two languages). When children learn their first language(s), they are not, of course, in school. Rather, they are surrounded by people, often family, who look after them and talk to them continually. Even when they are not being talked to, they are surrounded by talk, which is made meaningful by the contexts in which it occurs. Children then begin to make their own meanings, often to the delight of carers who praise and encourage them. Learning a first language, therefore, is immersive, intensive, and personalised.

Most children, in contrast, learn English as an additional language in state schools, and state schools present a very different context. In the first place, children are usually in classes of at least 30 (Garton, Copland, and Burns, 2011), often sitting at desks in rows, and are usually taught by one teacher. Their language learning experience is, therefore, not personalised. Second, children study English for about 2 hours per week on average (Garton et al., 2011). Their language learning experience is, therefore, neither immersive nor intensive. Indeed, it is often something of a diversion from the usual curriculum, and in some contexts, it may be dropped in favour of other activities (e.g., sports practice) (see Gaynor, 2014). Of

course, some children learn English in an immersion context (in which all educational activities are carried out in English), and others may learn in dual immersion (in which some classes are taught in one language and other subjects in a different language, or in which the language changes according to the day of the week). Others may have daily English classes. However, these contexts are not the norm for most children.

Given these realities, it is no wonder that research evidence suggests that children who start learning English in early primary school do not develop better linguistic skills than those who start at high school (Singleton and Pfenniger, 2018). Indeed, children who start later quickly catch up and then outperform children who start young (Singleton and Pfenniger, 2018). For example, Muñoz (2006) reports on a study in which children who start language learning at 11 always did better in tests than those who started at 8 (see too Cummins, 1983; Harley, 1986).

Mihaljević-Djigunović and Vilke (2000) also found evidence that children with an early start did not outperform children with a later start in a number of areas, including grammar. However, early beginners seemed to be better than older beginners in pronunciation, orthography, and vocabulary. This research suggests that there may be some limited value in the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which posits that beyond a certain age ‘it is *impossible* to acquire certain capacities in the new language’ (Singleton and Pfenniger, 2018: 57, who also offer a detailed challenge to the concept of CPH). However, it is worth considering whether gains in pronunciation and orthography are worth the early start? The case for sounding like a ‘native speaker’ (mainly in English) has become much less compelling in recent years with the recognition that English is now an international language (rather than a British or American one) used by second-language speakers to communicate with each other rather than with British, American or Australian speakers. Accent and standard pronunciation are no longer as important as they once were. Furthermore, orthographic skills also seem less important in today’s digital world than they might previously have been. Gains in vocabulary, however, is of interest and deserves further investigation. However, I suspect that in later years, older children will also catch up in this regard, particularly as young children’s vocabulary development tends to be in limited fields because of their cognitive and emotional age.

### **A positive attitude to English**

Perhaps the most persuasive argument for an early start is that it can result in children developing a positive attitude to English (or any other additional

language). If children enjoy English classes, build confidence in the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing and feel a sense of progression and achievement, the amount or quality of the language they learn may not be that important. Rather, the battle for the hearts of children will have been won (Johnstone, 2018). Many teachers can and do achieve this goal. However, Copland, Garton, and Burns (2014) report that teachers globally report a whole range of challenges in primary English classes, from children's poor motivation to large classes and from children's reluctance to speak to addressing differentiation. These realities suggest that classes, where children can develop a positive attitude to English might be few in number. Indeed, primary English might do more harm than good, particularly when the transition into high school is not well developed (see Burns et al. 2013).

Li, Han, and Gao (2018) set out a number of reasons why children might suffer from poor motivation. Two are of particular import: the first is parental support and the second social-economic status. In terms of the former, Li et al. (2018) list a number of studies which have shown a strong link between parents' involvement in their children's English language studies (for example, through engaging children in talking about learning English) and the interest and engagement of children (e.g., Butler 2015; Cheung and Pomerantz, 2012; Grolnick et al., 2009). When parents are involved, therefore, children tend to be more successful English language learners. The second suggests that wealthier parents are able to provide children with opportunities to develop their English, for example, through providing opportunities for children to meet competent users of English as well as through providing resources for learning such as extra classes and English media. However, while some children will benefit from the socioeconomic status of their parents, others will be disadvantaged. To this, I now turn.

### **The Matthew Effect**

The English language has been offered for many years to young learners at fee-paying schools, and as noted in the previous section, wealthier parents of children at state schools may send their children to after school English language classes at private language schools. The drive to lower the age at which children learn English has partly been encouraged by parents who do not have these means but believe their children will be at a disadvantage if they do not learn English. However, as Lamb (2011) has pointed out, early English language learning in the state sector has not necessarily led to an equal playing field. Large classes, limited time devoted to English and

inexperienced or unskilled teachers (see below) has meant that many children do not progress at the same rate as those children who have school classes and the private classes in addition. This has been called the Matthew Effect in early English language teaching by Lamb, that is, “For unto every one that hath shall be given, and he shall have abundance, but from him, that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath” (Gospel According to Matthew, XXV, 29). In other words, those who most benefit from early English language education are children of higher socioeconomic status. Those for whom the policy is designed to help (those of lower socioeconomic status) do worse.

A further consequence of this phenomenon is the mixed level class, a challenge identified by Copland et al. (2014). Children who attend private classes often have English language skills far in advance of those who do not. Teachers must try to accommodate all learners, but the range of skills in one class can make this very difficult. Indeed, one teacher reported:

It is difficult for me. Some children are better than me in English! (Garton et al., 2011)

The Matthew Effect goes beyond the classroom: there is a pernicious international effect. It is known, for example, that numbers of Korean families send their children to English speaking countries, including countries such as Singapore where English is used as a lingua franca, to learn English. Often the children are accompanied by the mother, leading to the ‘wild geese’ syndrome as hundreds of fathers are left behind to earn enough money to support the family abroad (Cho, 2007). This phenomenon can lead to economic hardship (not all families find it easy to support this overseas sojourn) and social issues (as a result of parents being separated from children and spouses from each other). However, the reward is that South Korea gains a workforce with both linguistic and intercultural skills, which supports its ability to thrive.

## **Practicalities and pedagogies**

A significant factor in whether early English language learning is efficacious is the quality of English language teachers. A number of scholars have consistently highlighted the fact that, in many contexts, teachers are not prepared to teach English (e.g., Enever, Moon, and Raman, 2007; Copland et al., 2014). The problem is complex. In some cases, teachers may be generalists asked to add English to their repertoire with little or no training. In addition, they may not feel they have the English skills required

for the job. Sometimes teachers who have been trained to teach English to secondary aged students or adults are employed in the primary sector and can struggle with introducing appropriate pedagogies for children or may not understand the basics of child development. Lack of confidence can also be a hindrance to teaching English effectively.

In some countries, people who speak English as a first language are employed as teachers in primary schools (so-called ‘NESTs,’ that is, native English language teachers). They may have no teaching qualification as well as no teaching experience (Garton et al. 2011) and are employed for their linguistic skills alone. These teachers may be paired with local primary teachers to team-teach classes, but this is not always successful, and in some cases, the NESTs are expected to teach classes of young children with very little support (Copland et al., 2016). Unfortunately, the policy is not always underpinned by practical measures to ensure it can be successful; in the case of early English language learning, the mismatch can lead to language poverty.

Another practical issue is the dearth of appropriate pedagogies for teaching English to young learners. Much of what is recommended is derived from communicative language teaching (CLT), which was developed to teach adult learners in well-resourced classrooms with small student numbers, a clear contrast with the crowded, under-resourced classrooms in which most young learners teachers work. Some activities will, of course, be appropriate, but many others will not. At present, we are still learning about how to engage young children in their language learning (see, for example, work by Mourão (2014) and by Sayer and Ban, (2014). However, there is a long way to go until there is a consensus about effective approaches that are contextually relevant.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined a number of issues that surround EELL from the age debate to appropriate pedagogies. In my view, there is currently not a strong case for introducing the English language to 5-9-year-olds in the state sector. In fact, I would argue that time spent on English is time that could be spent on subjects that do enhance children’s life chances (see too Lamb, 2011). With respect to literacy, Murphy and Evangelou (2016) warn:

‘we have a situation where a foreign language is introduced at a time when the L1 has not yet fully developed... [I]n the zeal to learn English, some educators, parents, and policymakers seem to have lost sight of the importance of supporting the L1’. (p. 11)

We should be careful to ensure that the rush to teach English to young children does not create problems in other areas, be they literacy development, increased inequality between children, or additional and stressful work for teachers. Current research does not provide evidence of positive gains for young children learning English in schools: until such time as it does, we should resist pressure to introduce it.

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## CHAPTER 2

# GLOBALIZATION AND THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO YOUNG LEARNERS: MACRO AND MICRO PERSPECTIVES

YASEMIN KIRKGOZ

### **Introduction**

With the effect of globalization in the 1990s, countries needed to develop and raise human capital specifically competent in communicating in English, which is widely considered as the language of international communication (Crystal, 2003). Improving proficiency in English has become one of the national strategies for many governments (Graddol, 2006) in their efforts to respond to the more globalised world, and for internationalization. Consequently, there has been a rapid global expansion of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYLs) programmes in public schools in many countries (Spolsky and Moon, 2012). This chapter presents an overview of foreign language education policy as related to teaching English to young learners in many countries, including Turkey, in response to globalization and internationalization of the education system. First, the macro-level policy issues are presented. This is followed by a discussion of micro-level implementations. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the points raised and suggests professional development opportunities for teachers as implementers of policy decisions.

### **Macro Perspectives**

In the early 1990s, as part of their national policy of globalization of the education system, the governments of many countries instituted curriculum reforms that introduced English for young learners as a compulsory subject into the school curricula. In the Asia-Pacific region, the governments of China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Japan, and Taiwan were involved in curriculum

innovation by introducing English as a compulsory subject at younger ages (Nunan, 2003). In South Korea, with increasing economic prosperity, the demand for an ever-earlier start in the school system resulted in a wide diversity of provision in both private and state sectors in which such initiatives as English villages and camps, where children are exposed to English-only, were set up (Lee, 2009).

Not only in Asian countries but also in many European countries was English also given central importance in the school curriculum. In countries such as Italy, Spain, Poland, and Greece, English has been given much prominence in educational policymaking and planning; it is taught as an official part of the curriculum in public primary schools (Enever, Moon, and Raman, 2009). In 1980 in Croatia, English for young learners began to be introduced at grade four (age 9/10) (Stokic and Djigunovic, 2000), in 1993 in Greece at grade four (age 9), and in 1993 in Italy with three hours of weekly instruction at grade three (age eight) (Gattullo and Palotti, 2000).

As in many other countries, a series of curriculum reforms took place in Turkey to enable the country to become globally competitive. In fact, in Turkey, the underlying motivation that drove policymakers to prioritize English as the most prominent foreign language in education serves linguistic and non-linguistic goals. While the benefits drive linguistic goals that acquiring proficiency in English would yield in developing human capital to communicate in English for economic, social, and business relations, non-linguistic goals relate to the underlying social and political desires of Turkey to participate in a globalized economy and to internationalize its education (Kırkgöz, 2009).

Turkey has responded to the global influence of English in its foreign language policy by introducing English in the 4th grade for young language learners (age 9) in the primary school curriculum in 1997, as part of a major curriculum innovation project initiated to reform Turkey's ELT practice. The 1997 curriculum introduced the concept of a communicative approach (CLT) into the education system for the first time and a student-centred approach to pedagogy. The ultimate aim of the curriculum was stated by the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MNE) as developing learners' communicative capacity to prepare them to use the target language for communication through various classroom activities. The teacher's role was specified as that of a guide and a facilitator of the learning process to promote communicative language proficiency of the learners practiced through games, dialogues, and meaningful contextualized learning activities so that children can be entertained while learning English (Kırkgöz, 2008).

To ensure higher levels of proficiency in English for Turkish young learners, particularly in state primary schools, in 2005, the foreign language

curriculum was revised to incorporate further changes, such as the use of tasks, multiple intelligences theory, content and language integrated learning, and performance-based assessment to update the assessment system (MEB, 2006). Another round of curriculum innovation was initiated in 2012 to be executed in 2013–2014 academic year when the Turkish MNE launched a new educational initiative to start ELT at an earlier age, from grade 2 (age 6-6.5) to keep up with the global trend that the earlier children start to learn English, the higher the level of proficiency they will achieve. The revised curriculum, once again, highlights the need to enhance communicative competence in English (MEB, 2013).

Despite some variations among countries in macro-level policy adjustments, what is most common to these non-English speaking countries, including Turkey, has been to lower the age at which children start to learn English as a compulsory subject in primary education. In addition, the trend towards early English around the world has led to the creation of new student-centered communicative-oriented pedagogy. The introduction of communicative-oriented teaching led to a shift in teaching practice from the traditional teacher-centered, transmission-oriented paradigm to teaching to enhance the language proficiency of young learners.

## **Micro Perspectives**

With the introduction of English into the young learner primary English curricula, great emphasis has been put on the development of children's communicative competence; however, implementation of the communicative oriented curriculum created several challenges in many countries, as revealed by a number of studies. In the Turkish context, Kırkgöz (2008) investigated how the 1997 macro-level Communicative-Oriented Curriculum (COC) objectives specified for young learners are implemented at a micro-teaching level in Turkish state primary schools and what factors impacted the processes of implementation. Although the MNE's objectives highlight the promotion of learners' practical, communicative skills, it was found that most teachers still followed grammar-based transmission oriented language teaching and they were unable to create the proposed communicative learning environment, and the translation of the policy objectives from the macro-level into the micro-level was not in line with policy expectations. The findings revealed that the teachers' instructional practices showed variation and that the CLT proposed by the MNE did not seem to have given rise to the expected impact on teachers' classroom instructional practices leading to a gap between macro policy decisions with micro-level implementations. Among the factors that had a significant impact on

teachers' classroom application of communicative teaching were insufficient instructional support to teachers, limited instructional time, inadequate resources, lack of qualified teachers, and, most importantly, teachers' lack of understanding of what CLT entailed.

Following the recent curriculum innovation which lowered the start age even further to grade 2, Kırkgöz and Yaşar (2014) investigated teachers' perceptions of the early foreign language learning curriculum in Turkish state primary education, challenges teachers encountered in teaching younger age students and their preparedness to teach English to them. Teachers included within the scope of the study were all those primary teachers of English teaching grade 2 classes in state schools in a province in Turkey. While the teachers welcomed the new grade 2 primary ELT curriculum, research findings revealed gaps in teachers' perceptions of readiness to teach younger learners. Teaching younger learners with a focus on listening and speaking skills was admitted to be highly challenging by the teachers. In fact, with the recent introduction of English into the young learner primary ELT curricula in many countries around the world, development of children's oral-aural skills has been highlighted, and the learning and teaching of these skills have started to receive more attention in the school curriculum (for a detailed discussion of challenges experienced by young learner teachers for teaching listening and speaking, see Kırkgöz, 2018).

Many of the findings from the Turkish context are consistent with curriculum experiences in primary education in many other countries. To illustrate just a few, Hu (2002) identified several constraints on the adoption of CLT, such as large class size, lack of necessary resources, and limited instructional time influencing the use of CLT in China. In a case study with three teachers in the Hong Kong context, Carless (2003) reported similar findings. Nunan (2003), in his investigation of the English language practices of some countries in the Asia-Pacific region, reported that the problems common to all countries include inadequacy in teacher education including the pedagogic knowledge of the teachers, inadequate preparation and exposure to the target language, all making it challenging to implement CLT in the classroom of public schools.

Overall, these findings suggest that the challenges teachers face in teaching English to young learners are common and that teachers have a crucial role in the successful implementation of curriculum objectives within the school system. Teachers, therefore, need to be supported to help them use and integrate new ideas into their instructional practices, particularly during the first few years of the innovation process, which tend