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Methods of teaching English language in primary school

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Abstract: This article introduces the use of scientific methods used for the formation of English language learning skills in young schoolchildren, to simplify the language learning process, and foreign experience in this regard.

Key terms: Common European Framework of Reference, previous research, proficiency, speaking in chorus, noting the hegemony of English.

International comparisons of English language teaching-learning and proficiency outcome sat the school level are generally absent from the research literature. A 1995 study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) had originally intended to assess student achievement but was cancelled after its Phase 1 data collection on the policy context due to lack of funding (see Dickson and Cumming, 1996, for details of Phase 1). However, in response to the growing importance of English for economic globalization, IEA has just launched a new comparative study focusing specifically on English in the participating countries, though the target population is Grade 10 students, and reports will not be available. Earlier research (Gika, 1997) compared primary foreign language teaching across Italy, Spain, England and Greece, noting the hegemony of English (which also led to the failure to focus on other languages in England), but did not report on language outcomes for students, though teachers 'concern with their own language levels was noted[1].

Other previous research (Martin, 2000) also focused on foreign language teaching across Europe with a view to improving provision in the UK, but again did not assess language proficiency. Instead, general conclusions were made about the ability of children to learn languages under certain conditions, which have relevance for effective primary English teaching, that: children of primary age can effectively learn [original emphasis] aspects of a foreign language; that the teaching approaches must be appropriate to their age group; that continuity of foreign language into the secondary school is important and that the quality of the teaching must be high.

Lack of information on English language outcomes is surprising, given the importance attached to increasing English language skills by national governments, who would be expected to be concerned about the return on their investment in education, and particularly so in light of the trend towards lowering the age at which English is taught in schools. This trend towards ever-earlier introduction of English can be clearly seen in Roxon's (2013) international survey of policy and practice in primary English teaching, which noted that one-third of countries had lowered the starting age since the first iteration of the survey some ten years previously, with 30 of 64 countries surveyed now teaching English from Grade 1[2].

Some cross-national comparative research has focused on limited aspects of classroom behavior, such as in Hardman's (2007) study of pupil participation and engagement in Kenyan and Nigerian primary English classes, where English is the medium of instruction; or on related teacher factors as in Butler's (2004) study of self-perceptions of actual and desired English proficiency levels that primary school teachers have in Korea, Taiwan and Japan. This research has important outcomes that may be of relevance to other countries, such as the need to "focus on the school as the best level of intervention for improving the quality of teaching and learning, and the necessity "to identify what kinds and levels of English proficiency elementary school teachers need to teach English" as well as 'to better understand what types of competencies (regarding both knowledge and the ability to use such knowledge) elementary school EFL teachers must have".

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Other comparative research has focused on the impact of language policy and planning, notably Baldauf (2011), both within the Asia-Pacific region, while Kaplan et al. (2011) discuss general reasons for the failure of policy decisions to introduce English at the primary level. Kaplan (2011) noted two major "urban legends", which require analysis with respect to English teaching:

People in many polities have come to believe that their children would be guaranteed better economic opportunities if they had English as part of their linguistic repertoire. This belief has supported the addition of English to the school curriculum - initially at the secondary school level and then at the intermediate school level. A decade or more of experimentation demonstrated that *English at intermediate school was not sufficient to develop proficiency, so another legend -that early introduction to English would be the panacea - spurred an international belief that English language education should begin at the first grade, or even better in kindergarten.*

They assert that these legends have two inherent fallacies, that:

- being English-knowing is not a guarantee of an improvement in economic opportunity
-early English learning is not a guarantee of near-native English proficiency.

Nunan came to the conclusion that the accelerating trend towards earlier English language instruction in the region was ill-considered and having no positive effect. He said, "*The single most pervasive outcome of this study is that English language policies and practices have been implemented, often at significant cost to other aspects of the curriculum, without a clearly articulated rationale and without a detailed consideration of the costs and benefits of such policies and practices on the countries in question. Furthermore, there is a widely articulated belief that, in public schools at least, these policies and practices are failing".*

Nunan also noted that the decision to introduce English at the primary level was largely political and based on folk wisdom that "the younger the better was axiomatic in language learning, irrespective of the context of learning. Other problems noted were inequity regarding access to effective language instruction, inadequately trained and skilled teachers, and a disjunction between curriculum rhetoric and pedagogical reality", all of which lead to the conclusion that governments wishing to introduce English into the primary curriculum need first of all to establish pre-conditions for success by tackling the problems Nunan has identified.

Eight years later the review by Baldauf revealed little different in a wider range of countries: Bangladesh, China, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Taiwan, Timor-Leste and Vietnam, with the exception of Singapore, where English was increasingly being used as a first language in many households and was displacing local first languages, Mandarin and Tamil. The trend towards the early introduction of English had: *...intensified under the pressure of economic competition... despite the fact that such teaching requires massive commitments of funds (i.e. resourcing policy), special early childhood teacher training, teachers with excellent language skills(i.e. personnel policy), and books and materials(i.e. curriculum, materials and methods policy)[3].*

The challenges of inequitable access to effective English language teaching, poorly trained teachers with limited language skills and officially mandated curricula that did not match with actual classroom practice, or were impossible to implement in the classroom conditions, were all reiterated in this review and are illustrative of many of the "12reasons for educational language plans sometimes
Failing" discussed in Kaplan (2011) and collated in Table 1.

Table 1: Reasons for the failure of educational language plans:

1	The time dedicated to language learning is inadequate.
2	Indigenous teacher training is not appropriate or effective.
3	Native speakers cannot fill the proficiency and availability gap.
4	Educational materials may not be sufficient or appropriate.
5	Methodology may not be appropriate to desired outcomes.
6	Resources may not be adequate for student population needs.
7	Continuity of commitment may be problematic.
8	Language norms may be a problem.
9	International assistance programs may not be useful.

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10	Primary school children may not be prepared for early language learning.
11	Instruction may not actually meet community and/or national objectives.
12	Language endangerment may increase.

These 12 causes for failure may be reformulated as pre-conditions for success in the implementation of English in primary schools, as in Table 2.

Table 2: Pre-conditions for success in the implementation of educational language plans:

1	The time dedicated to language learning must be adequate.
2	Indigenous teacher training must be appropriate and effective.
3	Native speakers should not be used to fill the proficiency and availability gap.
4	Educational materials must be sufficient and appropriate.
5	Methodology should be appropriate to desired outcomes.
6	Resources must be adequate for student population needs.
7	Continuity of commitment should be ensured.
8	Language norms should not be a problem.
9	International assistance programs, if present, should be useful.
10	Primary school children must be prepared for early language learning.
11	Instruction should meet community and/or national objectives.
12	Language endangerment should not be increased.

The necessity of establishing pre-conditions such as these when introducing English into primary schools, or lowering the starting point to earlier primary grades, is widely acknowledged by educational researchers. Hayes presented a similar list of factors that needed to be taken into account when discussing this kind of educational innovation, based on his work on primary English provision:

Changes are, however, not just necessary in the new grade levels in which English is introduced but throughout the entire system as earlier introduction of a subject inevitably requires adjustment to the curriculum and materials in all subsequent grades.

The follow-on implications of a decision to teach English earlier in the school cycle are profound …all manner of other factors come into play which are common to systemic educational reform for any subject area in the curriculum. These are, primarily:

- ensuring that there are adequate numbers of teachers to teach the subject to the particular grades;
- ensuring that these teachers are well trained for the task;
- ensuring that instructional time is available in the curriculum for the teaching of the subject;
- ensuring that curriculum materials and teaching-learning approaches are appropriate to the age group;
- ensuring that adequate time has been allowed for the preparation of new curriculum materials;
- ensuring that appropriate and timely in-service training is given to teachers in the use of the materials and teaching-learning approaches;
- ensuring that adequate in-school advisory support is available to teachers as they implement the curriculum;
- ensuring that appropriate evaluation procedures are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the innovation;
- ensuring that adequate material and financial resources are available to implement all of the above;
- and, of course, ensuring that necessary adjustments are made to the curriculum and materials for all subsequent grades, and that teachers are given training to introduce them to these changes in the higher grades[4].

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Elsewhere, Duff notes that a number of variables related to the child learner, classroom organization of teaching and the school curriculum are essential variables to take into account when considering earlier English instruction:

The age at which FL learning commences and the intensity, duration, and quality of FL instruction, the status of the FL course itself within the school curriculum, and students' met linguistic efficiency are all variables that must be taken into account when changing policies of this nature and evaluating the effectiveness of earlier FL instruction.

Nevertheless, despite all of these policy prescriptions and analyses listing various factors to take into account for success in primary English teaching, it seems that decisions to introduce or lower the starting age for the teaching of English remains remarkably immune to research evidence and are primarily political rather than educational. Even more troubling, given the fact that teaching English in primary schools is predicated on the belief (or fallacy) that it will lead to enhanced proficiency, is that there remains a paucity of research focusing on students' English language outcomes at the end of primary schooling. Of the few studies that measured language proficiency, the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) project, as its name implies, dealt with a very restricted context in Spain and focused primarily on determining the impact of age of onset of learning on attainment [5].

The results of this study indicated that there was no advantage to an early start to learning English but that, in contrast, older learners (starting at age 14) progressed faster than younger learners (whether starting at age eight or 11) and younger learners did not catch up over the six-year time span of the research. The conclusion drawn was that 'second language learning success in a foreign language context may be as much a function of exposure as of age, reinforcing the notion that an earlier starting age as a panacea for English language learning in school contexts is indeed a fallacy. A later study remains one of the few major transnational research undertakings to include measurement of students' language proficiency at the primary level among its research goals.

Factors determining the efficacy of the primary education system as a whole underpin specific factors determining the efficacy of primary English education in particular. The list of characteristics that follows must be interpreted within particular socio-educational contexts and not thought of as prescriptive or being universally applicable without local adaptation. With that caveat, to sum up, the following characteristics are desirable for effective primary English language education within national education systems [6]:

1. Teaching by generalist primary class teachers with training in primary English language teaching methods.
2. Teachers with an English language level of at least B2, but preferably C1 on the CEFR.
3. A pre-service teacher training system in which school teachers are required to have master's degrees.
4. A school-focused system of continuing professional development which allows teachers adequate time to reflect on new information about teaching-learning and to incorporate it into existing knowledge structures, both by themselves and in collaboration with colleagues.
5. An education system in which teachers are respected, trusted and given the freedom to organize instruction according to the needs of their pupils within a guiding national framework.
6. Teachers who have positive attitudes towards English and teaching the language. This in turn will influence children's motivation to learn, their enjoyment of their English classes and, ultimately, their achievement.
7. A curriculum which allows teachers and children opportunities to engage in meaningful language use, which also provides opportunities for considerable recycling of target language in new contexts and which is age-appropriate; theme-based teaching is strongly recommended.
8. A realistic language target for children of A1–A2on the CEFR by the end of the primary cycle.
9. Ideally, instructional time should be concentrated towards the end of the primary cycle rather than provided in smaller amounts over a longer time span, though it is recognized this may be difficult to implement in practice.

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10. Ideally, materials should be prepared by teachers to respond to the specific needs of their own classes; where materials are prepared by others, they should be founded on an understanding of how young children learn languages and provide stimulating, theme-based activities promoting genuine communicative language use.
11. Considerable out-of-school exposure to English in the local environment, including through films and television programs in English which are subtitled rather than dubbed into learners' L1.Underpinning all of the above are the following characteristics, which relate to the education system as a whole and, thus, are also desirable for effective primary English language education.
12. An equitable education system in which socio-economic status is not linked to academic achievement.
13. An education system in which private tuition is not regarded as essential for academic success.
14. An education system in which high-stakes testing is not seen as a means to promote academic achievement. It was designed specifically:
To explore contexts for foreign/second language learning in state-funded primary schools in Europe with the aim of clarifying what can realistically be achieved in classroom contexts where relatively limited amounts of curriculum time are available for language learning (as is commonly found across Europe)[7].

The sampling of schools was based on convenience of access for the researchers, rather than randomized to ensure that there was no bias in the sample selected, which detracts somewhat from the generalizability of the results, even though they attempted to control for variables such as socioeconomic background and geographical location - urban, semi-urban and rural.

As would be expected, over the lifetime of the research gave rise to a number of presentations and publications, both country-specific and thematic, which explores learning environments and motivation among young learners. Since the rationale for teaching English in primary schools is based on putative enhanced proficiency from starting earlier, it is interesting to examine the language outcomes for children involved in the Ellie. The broad characterization of outcomes in the Executive Summary of the final research is somewhat vague, as follows these language achievements[8]:
-Outcomes are moderate at this stage;
-The range of outcomes varies substantially across countries;
-Higher levels are achieved by learners of English, particularly where English is used more widely in social contexts;
-Speaking skills develop only gradually under conditions of limited curriculum time;
-By the fourth year of learning, most children are able to read short comic strip stories;
-As children develop a larger vocabulary, they begin to syntactically complexity their language.

Participating countries use the level descriptors in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) as targets for language outcomes in the primary cycle, in spite of the fact that these were not developed for use with young learners but 'were formulated drawing from a corpus of adult language use, failing to capture the essential features of children's early foreign language (FL) learning experiences. Though the ELLIE concludes that CEFR level descriptors are inappropriate, they remain in use and of necessity influenced the project's language assessment instruments, which were based on the 'can do' statements developed by the Association of Language Testers in Europe for each CEFR level.

The actual CEFR targets set by each of the participating countries are given in Table 3.

Table 3: Intended language outcomes for primary children in ELLIE countries:

Country	**CEFR target/age**
England	A1 by 11 years
Croatia	A1 by ten/11 years
Italy	A1+ by 11 years
Netherlands	A2 by 12 years
Poland	A1 by 11 years
Spain	A1 by 12 years

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Sweden	A1 by nine years A2.1 by 12 years

Within the CEFR, the descriptors for levels A1 and A2 on the 'global scale' are as follows (Council of Europe):

Table 4: CEFR descriptors for A1 and A2 levels

Basicuser	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/her and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Both A1 and A2 on the CEFR levels are characterized as 'basic user'. In terms of these levels, Evener assesses language outcomes among participating learners as follows: The average ELLIE learners have approached A1 level (as described by the CEFR) in their oral and aural skills during the first four years of instruction

One teacher pointed out difficulties in pronunciation: "Pronunciation is a bit difficult because most first graders are missing front teeth. This problem is usually solved by speaking in chorus".

Instruction is organized in a variety of ways indifferent countries (see Table 5, below, which excludes England as the foreign language taught there is not of concern in this qualification paper).

Table 5: Organization of instructional hours in primary schools:

Country	**Typical number of lessons per week**	**Lesson duration**
Italy	Year 1 - one lesson; Year 2 - two lessons; Years 3-5 - three lessons per week	Recommendation of 60 minutes per week but may vary at individual schools
Netherlands	No specified number. Typically one to three lessons per week	Typically Years 1-2 - 20 minutes; Years 3-8 - 30-60 minutes
Poland	Two	45 minutes
Spain	No specified number; may be anything from one to four lessons per week	Typically 45-60 minutes
Sweden	Years 1-3- one lesson Year 4 - two lessons	20-30 minutes 40 minutes
Croatia	Two	45 minutes

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There is little difference in the intensity of instruction, with the 'drip feed' approach (a little instruction on a frequent basis) prevailing. What is noticeable is that, with the typical number of lessons per week, children take as much instructional time to reach A1 level as is often expected to reach A2[16].

For example, in Croatia, two x 45-minute lessons for 35 weeks per year over four years results in 210 instructional hours; whereas most publishers and English teaching websites give figures of around 180 to 200 instructional hours to reach A2. Of course, learning is not simply a response to the number of hours spent in a classroom and other variables must be taken into account such as out-of-class exposure to English, the context of learning, learning purpose, and so on.

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