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Syllabus development in early English language teaching

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Introduction

Early English language teaching (EELT) can be considered the most important development in English language teaching in the past few decades (Rich 2014; Rixon 2013). As English has become the dominant global language for economics and politics, governments have seen it necessary to ensure their competitiveness on the world stage through the encouragement of an English-speaking workforce (Garton et al. 2013; Rich 2014). This has led to the introduction of ELT programmes at ever earlier ages, generally under the questionable assumption that earlier is better for eventual English proficiency. We do not seek to join the ongoing debate over the decision to teach English to younger children (see Singleton and Pfenninger, this volume), but instead to simply recognise that it is happening. The issue in EELT is not necessarily the age of introduction, but rather the question of syllabus fit and related methodology, materials, assessment targets and standards which are too often based on adult ELT programmes and criteria, such as CEFR indicators (Hasselgreen 2013; Hayes 2014; Rich 2014; Rixon 2013). Throughout the chapter, we will be applying Bourke’s (2006) definition of ‘syllabus’ in an EELT context: encompassing course contents, reflecting a particular pedagogical approach and views of SLA as well as explicitly stated goals and related learning aims and objectives. While ‘syllabus’ and ‘curriculum’ are often used interchangeably in ELT literature, in order to unpack key issues and principles involved in what Pantaleoni (1991) calls ‘syllabus at the primary level’, it is crucial for us to differentiate. A ‘curriculum’ operates at the macro (often national and Ministerial) level while a ‘syllabus’ is ‘a more day-to-day, localised guide for the teacher . . . a statement of approach . . . a rationale for how that content should be selected and ordered’ (Pantaleoni 1991, p. 302).

Other terms which warrant clarification include the numerous ways children learning English are referred to globally including Young Learners (YL), Very Young Learners (VYL), Early Years (EY) and Primary Learners (Ellis 2004; Garton et al. 2013; Rich 2014; Rixon 2013). We will be focusing on the life stage of between ages 6–10, or Grades 1–5 (while recognizing that grades do not always correspond with years of age), which we will refer to as Early English language teaching. We are also cognizant that English instruction for children, including at the primary and pre-primary levels, does not only
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occur within the context of state schools, and that private education providers (i.e., language schools) are also significant influencers.

Young learner English language proficiency examinations, benchmarked on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), have also dictated EELT syllabus content in recent years. These high-stakes examinations which can determine not only progress or achievement of learning outcomes, but also admission to further education, migration rights or the awarding of certification (Hayes 2014; Rixon 2013), also reflect the growing influence of washback on EELT syllabuses. The trend towards starting English language instruction in the lower primary years or even earlier, without due consideration of children’s readiness, whether teachers are appropriately qualified as well as institutional and other sociocultural factors, have resulted in considerable mismatch when it comes to the age relevance of syllabus content worldwide.

Historical perspectives

Historically, English Language Teaching developed to meet the needs of adult learners, and as such, syllabuses for primary-aged children were initially based on linguistic items more appropriate for older learners (Littlejohn 2016a; Read 2016; Pantaleoni 1991). Adults tend to have specific reasons for learning an additional language, such as migration, employment or further academic study (White 1988), which differ greatly from children, who may not actually understand why they need to study English or French or Japanese, beyond its inclusion in their school timetables (Cameron 2001; Enever 2011; Jin et al. 2014; Moon 2005).

A major twentieth-century trend in language learning for adults – which inevitably influenced children’s English language syllabuses – were the oral-structural-situational syllabuses, popular until the 1970s (Littlejohn 2016a; Richards and Rodgers 2001; White 1988). Structural syllabuses are still in use with primary learners, both overtly and woven into the contexts of child-friendly stories, songs and activities (Littlejohn 2016a; Stec 2013).

A structurally determined, linear syllabus is relatively easy to apply and assess, and demands less English language proficiency from the teacher (Pantaleoni 1991; Bowman et al. 1989; White 1988). It is very practical for publishers, policy makers and assessors, as language targets are arranged in a nominally logical sequence (Anderson 2016; Richards and Rodgers 2001). It is also familiar to EELT teachers, who may be tempted to teach as they were taught, despite the introduction of newer, more age-appropriate approaches to syllabus design such as activity-based, topic-based, content-based and story-based syllabuses which may however present a cultural mismatch (Anderson 2016; Bowman et al. 1989; Clifford and Htut 2015; Enever 2014; Schweisfurth 2013). Although supporters extol its virtues with lower level learners, including primary-aged children (Anderson 2016), a structural syllabus is ill-suited to teach children as ‘the ability to see, focus on and manipulate conscious rules of grammar, or follow controlled patterns based on form . . . [is] beyond the developmental stage of all but the oldest learners in the primary school age’ (Littlejohn 2016a, p. 31).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) saw a shift away from its grammatically structured syllabuses towards a more functional approach. For learners and teachers, the focus was now on meaningful communication in the classroom rather than forms, with the overall objective of communicative competence (Guerrero 2014; Thornbury 2006). As CLT gained in popularity, ELT syllabuses, including those for children, began to integrate functional language and related exponents such as asking for directions or ordering a meal (Richards and Rodgers 2001; Thornbury 2006; White 1988). Assessment also came
to be influenced by this new approach to syllabus design, which moved English towards a communications-based standard (Read 2016; Thornbury 2006), including the decision by Cambridge Assessment English to omit translation and literature-focused questions in favour of more authentic skills-based listening and reading papers in the mid-1970s (Weir 2013). However, with the global boom in international language examinations EELT syllabuses came to be heavily modelled on task types typically found in these high-stakes skills-based exams, even at younger stages of learning (Read 2016).

While arguably more appropriate for children than rote memorization, translation or explicit grammar instruction, many classroom tasks specified in CLT syllabuses for children remain largely ‘a rehearsal for future possible experiences’ (Littlejohn 2016a, p. 32), existing outside the sphere of children’s immediate authentic communication needs (Moon 2005). Bourke (2006, p. 208) further argues that we need to, ‘re-discover and inhabit the world of the child. Children live in a world of fantasy and make-believe, a world of dragons and monsters, talking animals, and alien beings. In their world there are no tenses, nouns or adjectives; there are no schemas labeled “grammar”, “lexis”, “phonology” or “discourse”’.

Young Learner-specific ELT pedagogy was not explicitly researched until the late 1990s (Rich 2014). And while EELT has tended to be divergent from research in mainstream Early Childhood Education, influenced more broadly by existing adult-focused language programmes, child-centred approaches have also become influential in EELT syllabus design, including Vygotsky’s concept of learning as a social construct within a zone of proximal development (ZPD), and Bruner’s focus on scaffolding and routines to support (L1) learning (Cameron 2001). In learning either their first or additional languages, children remain meaning bound, focusing on ‘what language says, not how it works’ (Littlejohn 2016a, p. 31), thereby further reinforcing Bourke’s (2006) assertion that children respond to age-accessible content rather than language in the abstract, which has significant implications for EELT syllabus design.

The CEFR has become another major influencer in English language syllabus design for adults, teenagers and children. This Council of Europe project sought to clarify and codify needs of the adult language learners of its member states, considered by some to be a bureaucratic standardisation exercise that may have ignored the specifics of individual learners, including young learners (Howatt and Widdowson 2004; White 1988). The CEFR grew out of this project, not just for English, but for all the official languages of Europe (Cambridge English 2011), with a research-based focus on functional language rather than knowledge of grammar, and a view towards European plurilingualism (Thornbury 2006).

The CEFR has become a widely accepted benchmark for developing English language syllabuses throughout the world, which was never its intended purpose (Cambridge Assessment English 2011; Howatt and Widdowson 2004), particularly not with children (Enever 2011; Enever 2011; Rixon 2013). Conversely, such influence could be regarded as positive, leading to more genuinely communicative teaching globally. By focusing on everyday linguistic competencies and outcomes, the CEFR has facilitated the creation of communicative language targets embodied by both national and local syllabus documents within and outside its intended domain of Europe (Enever 2011; Hayes 2014; Rixon 2013). However, by describing and codifying the criteria necessary for a learner to be deemed proficient in a language, the CEFR inadvertently created a top-down interpretation of successful language proficiency. As mentioned, this has influenced syllabus and related coursebook content, and in turn assessment via high-stakes ELT examinations for children, often as future proficiency targets.
To assume however that adult ELT approaches are no longer prevalent in EELT syllabuses would be misleading (Read 2016). Structural syllabus design continues to influence the learning of English by young children reflected in the use of particular classroom techniques (such as explicit highlighting of grammatical forms), and the favouring of examination-preparation tasks over authentic age relevant communication, as well as the inclusion of certain themes in coursebooks. The movement towards starting English instruction earlier means that these adult-focused approaches are being found in syllabuses for younger and younger children, potentially to the detriment of their wellbeing and motivation. Expected thresholds of achievement via overly rigorous application of the CEFR are also a key issue in EELT, which will be explored in the next section.

Critical issues and topics

Primary educational practice and syllabus mismatch

It is generally accepted that children acquire languages in vastly different ways than older age groups, tending to need less overt instruction (Cameron 2001; Moon 2005; Rich 2014). Bourke (2006, p. 282) asserts, ‘The language has to be packaged in a way that makes sense to children . . . Children need exposure to “whole instances of language use” and not a series of disjointed bits of language’. Furthermore, best practice at this level should also take into consideration that:

- Materials must ‘respond to the specific needs’ of children and be ‘founded on an understanding of how young children learn languages’ (Hayes 2014, p. 2).
- Children’s motivation to learn a language differs greatly from an adult’s or adolescent’s motivation, but is key to the success of in-school foreign language programmes (Enever 2011).
- While linguistic outcomes can be assessed, other factors such as intercultural awareness and social development cannot, making them easier to omit in practice (Rixon 2015).
- Overt in-class test preparation is often more stressful for children, who tend to be more emotionally vulnerable than older learners when faced with assessments (Otomo 2016).
- Explicit grammar and lexical instruction is counter-intuitive to children’s natural language learning (Littlejohn 2016a).
- Every child has a different English literacy ‘entry point’, which may be influenced by how their L1 writing system differs from English (Cameron 2001).

A successful EELT practitioner, and by extension successful EELT syllabus, must therefore carefully consider both the linguistic and unique age-related needs of the learners. Pedagogical weaknesses which stem from faulty syllabus design can cause primary children’s motivation to learn English to decline as they progress through school (Enever 2011; Jin et al. 2014; Littlejohn 2016a). Shortcomings arising from syllabus documents which do not sufficiently take into account the life stage of the learners include inappropriate procedures, techniques and materials, further exacerbated by a perennial lack of support and training for teachers of this age group in how to implement the syllabus in classroom practice (Enever and Moon 2009; Garton et al. 2013; Hayes 2014; Rich 2014), alongside an unfortunate reliance on syllabuses that are heavily influenced by secondary-level ELT (Robinson et al. 2015; Stec 2013). This means that ‘despite the enormous expenditure and effort put into primary school language teaching, the promised gains frequently fail to materialise’ (Littlejohn 2016a, p. 31).
CEFR dominance in syllabus design

Syllabuses aligned with the CEFR are ‘wholly inappropriate’ for primary learners of English (Enever 2011, p. 5). Although developed specifically for European adult learners, the CEFR is now widely used in syllabuses to quantify English proficiency throughout the world, for even the youngest learners (Enever 2011; Hasselgreen 2013; Rixon 2013), though it may be little more than an easy, but inappropriate, way to validate language goals within a syllabus document (Rixon 2015). Furthermore, taken out of their intended context, the CEFR outcomes are overly used in syllabuses to determine what learners should achieve at the end of a term or year, rather than as a proficiency check on what they are able to do. As the CEFR was developed with adult and young adult (but not younger than adolescent) learners in mind, many of the topics are ill suited to the reality of a child’s immediate world. Take, for example, that travel, employment and shopping are all repeatedly mentioned in the CEFR A1-A2 level (CEFR 2001), yet primary-aged children are not expected to shop alone, attend job interviews, nor make travel arrangements. Therein lies the mismatch between ‘global generalizations and local circumstances, between specifications and specificity’ (Howatt and Widdowson 2004, p. 268) whereby a syllabus may be developed with learning outcomes based on the CEFR, but without a fully informed notion of the implications of adopting such a framework in a particular localised learning and teaching context (Cambridge Assessment English 2011; Little 2014; Rixon 2015).

This has not prevented a wide range of countries from adopting the CEFR A1-A2 descriptors as a de facto EELT syllabus (Enever 2011). The longitudinal ELLiE study of EELT in practice in Europe used the CEFR as targets (Enever 2011), even while acknowledging that these were ‘not developed for use with young learners’ (Hayes 2014, p. 12), while Rixon’s 2013 survey of global EELT found approximately a third of the surveyed countries included explicit language learning aims linked to the CEFR in syllabus documents (p. 35). Cyprus, for example, has fully aligned its EELT outcomes to the CEFR A1-A2 descriptors, stating, ‘It is expected that all children will have sufficiently covered the A1 level whereas stronger children will be able to move into the A2 scale during the 5th or 6th year’ (p. 10). The Cypriot EELT syllabus also provides teachers with explicit structural language foci related directly to the CEFR A1-A2 descriptors over a period of six years (Cyprus Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Proficiency exams based on the CEFR (i.e., those moderated by external examinations boards such as Cambridge Assessment English, Pearson Education and Trinity College London) and internationally marketed coursebooks have a mutually influential relationship (Weir 2013). Although these examinations were initially based on what learners were taught, i.e., the syllabus, the inverse is now more common, with international English language coursebook content for children based directly on the target exam task types underpinned by the syllabus (Read 2016), and all with a CEFR level prominently displayed on the cover. In EELT contexts where these publications are Ministry approved, they are often treated as an official syllabus document by the teachers in practice (Garton et al. 2013; Read 2016). Where coursebooks are versioned for a specific market, such as Italy, the UAE, Greece or South Korea, both the overt and covert applications of CEFR-type indicators or themes influenced syllabuses are frequently evident. The government-approved South Korean coursebook for Grade 3 includes the following chapter titles: Hello, I’m Minsu, Wash your hands., I Can Swim, and It’s Snowing (Yuasa 2010, p. 149), again a reflection of a list published in the CEFR suggesting appropriate ‘communication themes’, including personal identification, daily routines, leisure activities and the weather (2001, p. 52).
Teachers will often opt to follow the coursebook as a safe way to ensure that lessons satisfy the prescribed syllabus, while preparing learners for an assessment situation that may be in the distant future (Bowman et al. 1989; Enever and Moon 2009; Garton et al. 2013). Where a structural syllabus, a particularly popular choice in internationally marketed coursebooks (Anderson 2016), is married to future CEFR-indexed examinations, as in China, the result may be an explicit form and structure practice with little interaction with children as young as six to seven years old (Chen and Wang 2014). Similar form-focused practice with EELT learners has also been reported in Poland (Stec 2013), Sweden (Rich 2014) and Malaysia (Garton et al. 2013).

The role and impact of high-stakes examinations in EELT syllabuses

As highlighted previously, high-stakes examinations remain a key influencer and therefore warrant further exploration here. The influence of internal and external high-stakes examinations on syllabus design cannot be understated. The influence of assessment – both positive and negative – on syllabus is commonly known as washback, defined by Taylor (2005) as the way examinations affect the design of teaching and learning content for classroom use.

While many countries do not have Ministry-mandated examinations at the primary level (Rich 2014), teachers do still need to assess their learners for administrative purposes (Moon 2005). Examinations that may be used in upper primary or secondary may also exert an influence over primary teachers’ syllabus choices, in an extreme case of washback (Hayes 2014). For primary-level language learning, any alignment to outcomes based on future assessment criteria ignores accepted best practice in English language instruction with this age group.

External and national or local assessments may be used by policy makers in different ways, including as quality control at different levels (i.e., between schools, regions or even nations), to determine teacher promotion, or to influence classroom practice through washback (Hayes 2014). This can put enormous pressure on teachers to focus on specific items in their syllabuses that may be tested in later years, especially where teaching skills are evaluated in relation to students’ performance and results in examinations. Where there are no examination specifications, teachers are still expected to assess and report on their students’ progress (Rixon 2013). Existing external examinations may be seen as an objective scale by which to measure the effectiveness of both EELT teachers and the syllabus, or attempts may be made to link standardised proficiency examinations (such as the Cambridge Assessment English YLE tests) to the EELT syllabus. In Taiwan for example, as the age of introduction of English was recently lowered from Grade 7 to Grade 1, there was a need to determine whether the EELT syllabus was effective. Researchers compared Ministry guidelines and teachers’ syllabuses with the Cambridge YLE tests, finding a positive correlation, with the exception of songs and stories (neither of which is assessed in the YLE Starters, Movers or Flyers). By comparing syllabus documents to an existing, reputable and valid examination suite, governments and teachers may also be validating their syllabus decisions, policies on EELT and related classroom practices (Wu and Lo 2011).

Age-appropriate teaching skills and syllabus

The nearly universal decision to lower the age of introducing English in schools has led to a major increase in the demand for English language teachers. Whereas the ideal EELT
practitioner might be a proficient English user with specific teaching qualifications in primary pedagogy (Hayes 2014), the reality is that many who teach English to primary learners do not fit this narrow definition (Bowman et al. 1989; Garton et al. 2013; Hasselgreen 2013; Rixon 2013). In her 2013 survey of EELT teachers in practice, Rixon found the profile of EELT teachers to be inconsistent and often ambiguous, ranging from EELT specialists to ‘a qualified teacher who has no formal qualifications in English [to] Someone who is not qualified as a teacher but who knows English’ (p. 21). Other studies have also found that many primary practitioners are expected to teach English, but without the support, training or resources necessary to make this a successful endeavour (Littlejohn 2016a; Moon 2005). Where teachers are lacking in either specific primary pedagogical training or English proficiency, this inevitably results in significant discrepancies between syllabuses and classroom practice (Garton et al. 2103), with the former designed around communicative competence, and setting primary-level language outcomes that are inaccessible to teachers (Hayes 2014; Rich 2014; Schweisfurth 2013). The application of more communicative or age-appropriate methodologies in syllabus design may be misunderstood by untrained or unsupported teachers (Garton et al. 2013), while teachers who are less confident in their English proficiency, or who feel pressure to teach towards an examination, will tend to opt for more traditional instruction, even if this is not mandated by the syllabus itself (Bowman et al. 1989; Garton et al. 2013; Schweisfurth 2013). This was the case in Hong Kong, when a task-based EELT syllabus was introduced. In practice, teachers were resistant, citing a lack of appropriate resources, difficulty understanding the theory behind the reforms, increased noise in the classroom and concern over student success in the high-stakes Grade 6 examination (Adamson and Davison 2003, p. 35). Rather than embracing the task-based syllabus, the teachers tended to default to traditional activities and techniques such as dictations and focus on decontextualised grammar (ibid.). This situation is found in EELT classrooms worldwide where ‘teachers still use what are seen as more traditional formal grammar-focused approaches despite the fact that official curricula are promoting more communicative, activity-oriented approaches suitable for [children]’ (Enever and Moon 2009, p. 10).

In their 2013 study of global EELT classroom practice, Garton, Copland and Burns found that the most common EELT classroom activities included repeating after the teacher (75% in every class), reading out loud (70%) and doing gap-fills or grammar exercises (56–65%) (p. 48). While it was encouraging to see child-friendly activities such as songs and games (70%) and role plays (61%) also in use (ibid.), details were not given on how these were used: for enjoyment and communication, or as structural memorization? Were the songs used only as a veneer to hide a grammar-driven syllabus (Littlejohn 2016a)? Or were they written into the syllabus in a way that categorically removes all the enjoyment, replacing it with an assessable outcome as with the United Arab Emirates’ Grade 2 indicator: ‘Recite songs, poems and rhymes with clear diction, pitch, tempo and tone; retell a story with appropriate facts and relevant details, speaking clearly and at an appropriate pace’ (United Arab Emirates 2014).

The issues in EELT are thus multifaceted, but also interrelated. Structural syllabuses with form-focused lessons are still in use globally, based around topics that are listed in the limited A1-A2 descriptors of the CEFR. Where the CEFR is not explicitly used in syllabus documents to determine success criteria or language targets, there may be a ‘closed loop’ of teaching towards an examination, using coursebooks that are CEFR-based, regardless of cultural relevance or age-appropriacy. Meanwhile, the teachers, who may not be proficient enough in English to access the terminology used in the syllabus documents, find themselves pressured by outside forces to ensure success in future examinations, often in
situations where class sizes are unmanageably large, with few resources and little outside support or training. Where teachers do make pedagogical decisions in relation to their syllabuses, this often occurs in order to maintain the status quo of outdated and inappropriate teaching methods.

**Current contributions and research**

**Redefining linguistic outcomes in primary syllabuses**

In an attempt to address the issues identified here, CEFR-based syllabuses have been adapted to better suit children’s life stages (Hasselgreen 2013; Rixon 2013). The European Language Portfolio (ELP) sought to facilitate the use of the CEFR in primary to tertiary schools, including more learner-driven self-reflection, while also favouring intercultural awareness and learner autonomy (Little et al. 2011; Little 2014). Unfortunately, it has ‘failed to secure significant purchase in any [European] member states’ (Little 2014, p. 33), and is virtually unheard of outside of Europe. Another proficiency-based syllabus tool which has gained traction recently is the Global Scale of English (GSE). The GSE is unique in that it is made up of different scales according to the target learner and was developed over a number of years in collaboration with teachers, ELT authors and language specialists. The GSE for YLs includes such objectives as ‘Can follow short, basic classroom instructions, if supported by pictures or gestures’ or ‘Can recognise familiar words and basic phrases in short illustrated stories, if read out slowly and clearly’ (Pearson 2017, p. 12), both of which better reflect a child’s reality in the communicative language classroom than a more generic adult-focused scale like the CEFR. However, the GSE for YLs syllabus document was developed by a publishing company. This can be problematic whereby a for-profit company sets the assessment scales, researches impact and sells books and materials explicitly designed to improve proficiency. Clearly then, there is a conflict of interest in terms of a coursebook provider also setting the assessment agenda, where the influence of corporations on syllabuses, policies, assessments and materials in syllabus design risks potential bias (Mansell 2012).

**Topic, cross-curricular and content-based syllabuses**

The dearth of research in EELT syllabus design and implementation underscores how neglected the area is. Our review of the indexes of 60 ‘top landmark primary ELT methodology books and articles’ (as compiled by Rixon 2016) revealed that a mere 16 titles included any reference whatsoever to ‘syllabus’. Despite the predominance of proficiency descriptors and examinations-influenced coursebooks as the basis of EELT syllabuses outlined so far, this remains a partial picture. It is important to also consider other types of syllabus currently in use with primary learners to provide a sufficiently balanced view of global syllabus practice. Pinter (2017, pp. 127–128) demonstrates how recent syllabus outlines found in international coursebooks also adopt topic, cross-curricular and content-based approaches. Authentic child-friendly ‘Big Questions’ facilitate the integration of other school subjects such as social studies, art and science. She further highlights the influence of a child-relevant genre-based approach to syllabus design where both fiction and non-fiction act as springboards for each unit of work. In addition, twenty-first century skills are woven throughout syllabuses found in up-to-date coursebooks including the development of collaboration, critical and creative thinking skills, clearly reflective of inquiry-based and learner-centred approaches.
Lourenço and Mourão (2018) also refer to a number of innovative Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) projects in Portugal over the past decade where history and science syllabuses are taught via English. The use of CLIL as an approach for primary syllabus design has gained significant traction in a number of teaching and learning contexts in recent years; however, as Lourenço and Mourão (ibid.) caution, ‘despite the positive effects of these innovative approaches, they remain locally and narrowly circumscribed, lacking adequate government support and teacher preparation’ (p. 55), further highlighting the need for more favourable conditions for successful syllabus implementation. When unpacking such conditions, it is also necessary to clearly differentiate between state and private EELT sectors, whereby the latter tends to have greater freedom in terms of syllabus choice and, in turn, ability to successfully implement. Bourke (2006, pp. 280–281) argues that any syllabus for primary children needs to be planned in an ‘experientially appropriate’ manner and should include the following aspects:

- Topics of interest to children
- Stories
- Games
- Doing and making activities
- Songs, chants and rhymes
- Pairwork and groupwork tasks
- Web-based materials
- Children’s literature.

The above can all be readily attended to by a topic- and content-based syllabus such as Read’s (2010) project-based materials *Amazing World of Animals* and *Amazing World of Food* underpinned by a topic and content syllabus with outcomes such as ‘children create a food chain’ and ‘children design a poster to draw attention to world hunger’, with each lesson teaching real content in an age-accessible manner and language support embedded throughout. Innovative materials such as these demonstrate how topic, content and cross-curricular approaches to syllabus design can also be used to richly supplement and inject creativity into an existing structurally orientated syllabus for children.

**Recommendations for practice**

**Age-based syllabuses and teacher education**

The shortcomings of EELT syllabus design which we have highlighted so far in this chapter reflect what Sahlberg refers to as the adverse impact of the *Global Education Reform Movement* or ‘GERM’ (2012). This captures the ‘spread and infection’ of overly scripted pedagogy including an oppressive classroom culture of ‘right answerism’ (Grinder 1989; Holt 1969), a narrowly linguistic syllabus accompanied by heavy testing of outcomes and all within the increasingly corporate management of educational institutions. To prevent the spread of GERM in EELT syllabuses worldwide, there is a particular need to provide ongoing support to EELT practitioners and better enable them to implement alternative syllabus types and thereby teach in more age-appropriate ways.

The widespread use of the term ‘young learner’ when referring to children in EELT programmes, particularly in the private sector, is vague and causes confusion and lack of clarity for teachers. It has created a tendency to refer to learners with a varying range
of characteristics as if they form a homogenous group. While they may share commonly accepted needs and rights as children, learners in EELT around the world differ greatly in terms of their physical, psychological, social, emotional, conceptual, cognitive and literacy development. The first key recommendation for practice therefore is the development of genuinely, age-relevant English language syllabuses for primary children in line with the best practice principles outlined in the chapter (Copland and Garton 2014; Ellis 2014, Enever and Moon 2009).

Ministries of education and private language education providers have a responsibility to equip EELT practitioners with appropriate skills to work with the age groups they are teaching. Initial training as well as CPD needs to be both based around and driven by syllabus design fully congruent with learners’ life stages. In recognition of the urgent need for greater age appropriacy in syllabus design, the Council of Europe (2018) recently developed new CEFR-related descriptors specifically for primary learners aged seven to 10. Clearly, elements of content and topic-based approaches have been incorporated in an attempt to situate the can-do statements in the child’s world, such as ‘I can read and understand a simple illustrated text about means of transport and transportation, e.g. how fruit travels from the farmer to my home’ (ibid., p. 68). For these new descriptors to be adopted with any real success, ELLT practitioners will require ongoing planned and systematic support with ways to implement them at the lesson planning, teaching and assessment levels, thereby enabling them to better bridge the often stark gap between syllabus-related policy documents and actual classroom practice.

Furthermore, EELT needs to move beyond teacher education and training only focused on teaching language to a model which balances the roles of being a teacher of language with those of a teacher of children, including practical ways to develop learning to learn and life skills as a core part of any syllabus for primary-aged learners of English (Brewster et al. 2002; Ellis and Ibrahim 2015; Pinter 2017). With regard to language specifically, we advocate for the development of a corpus of child language to move further toward what Read (2016, p. 33) refers to as an ‘evidence-based approach to primary ELT syllabus content’.

**Integrating mainstream education approaches**

To counter the influence of limiting and inadequate linear structural syllabuses, Littlejohn argues the need for practitioners to break free from ‘the traditional confines of language teaching’ (2016b, p. 50) by integrating mainstream education approaches into syllabus design, thereby aligning classroom content with children’s ages and better reflecting developments in how they learn. Such approaches include application of the revised Bloom’s taxonomy for developing children’s critical and creative thinking skills in tandem with providing them appropriate language support (Littlejohn 2016b; Westbrook 2014). For example, Littlejohn suggests syllabus content should enable children to develop higher order thinking skills including ‘creating’, e.g., via designing a poster with ideas for a recycling scheme and ‘evaluating’, e.g., by giving opinions on story characters (2016b).

This language support approach to syllabus design is content- rather than language-driven and is clearly anchored in the child’s world which in turn contributes towards practitioners’ wider educator remit. Using the revised version of Bloom’s taxonomy develops twenty-first century skills in age-appropriate ways (Pinter 2017, Reis 2015). Therefore, as with a CLIL approach to syllabus design, language is no longer the driver and instead becomes a vehicle for meaningful child-friendly content (Lourenço and Mourão 2018).
Embedding learning to learn

Learning to learn is based on a philosophy of constructivism and social interactionism and clearly has its roots in Bruner’s theories of instruction (Pinter 2017; Ellis and Ibrahim 2015; Fisher 2005). Underpinning all learning are its links with learner autonomy, which is one of the most important aspects of a child’s overall educational development. It values diversity and takes into account that children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates and have different learning preferences. Implementing learning to learn in EELT syllabuses involves embedding both metacognitive strategies, i.e., thinking about learning: planning, monitoring, evaluating along with cognitive strategies which are task specific and involve children doing things with the language and their learning materials related to key skills areas.

According to Ellis and Ibrahim (2015), learning to learn in EELT provides teachers insight into what children think and helps plan next steps in learning, thereby encouraging learners and teachers to become more reflective throughout the course. This flexible framework approach to syllabus design helps teachers become more aware of the importance of routines and time management when planning their lessons. A key principle in EELT classrooms which adopt learning to learn in the syllabus is the need for regular and systematic reflective reviewing, as exemplified in the Plan-Do-Review model (Ellis and Ibrahim 2015).

Curricula and schemes of work

Given the issues highlighted in this chapter, we question whether the entire notion of ‘syllabus’ is relevant or even appropriate when working with children in the EELT classroom. Littlejohn (2016b) maintains a curriculum approach with its related schemes of work would be a better suited to determining and defining how English language teaching and learning is organised at the primary level. The challenge for adopting such a novel approach in EELT is to identify engaging, child-friendly ‘points of entry’ on which to base curriculum plans and schemes of work. One example which has gained popularity in multiple EELT contexts is the use of picturebooks as ‘springboards’ for course design. Children’s picturebooks enable children to access and deal with what Ghosn (2013, p. 40) refers to as ‘universal aspects of the human condition’ including equality, diversity and inclusion themes such as gender, ethnicity, religion and disability in age-appropriate and meaningful ways.

Ellis and Brewster (2014) demonstrate how between five to six picturebooks can comprise the annual EELT curriculum:

This would mean spending about five to six weeks on each story and about ten to twelve lessons per story, if the class has approximately one and a half to two hours of English per week. In this way, a storybook provides the starting point for a wide range of related language-learning activities.

(ibid., p.11)

This story-based approach strongly favours an acquisition-oriented methodology and additionally helps address the numerous issues with structural syllabuses alluded to earlier. It can be adapted for challenging learning contexts where access to picturebooks is lacking by using contextually relevant stories and enabling children to create their own modern retellings, which further develops higher order thinking skills. If such an approach is to be implemented with any degree of success, it needs to be an integral component of teacher
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education programmes such as the BEd course at the University of Zagreb developed for Croatian primary ELT undergraduates (Narancic Kovač 2016), which emphasises how teachers need to be trained to use picturebooks specifically for ELT purposes, and this is where medium to longer-term curriculum planning and schemes of work play a key role.

Assessment for learning

To alleviate the effects of washback in EELT curricula, Rixon (2012) advocates implementation for assessment for learning, whereby:

1. Lesson objectives are systematically shared with children in accessible language and/or the mother tongue.
2. Peer and self-assessment are commonplace.
3. Children are provided with immediate feedback.

Such feedback on children’s tasks and activities therefore progresses beyond task achievement and gives them concrete support about what to do next. Accessible language can be provided by EELT practitioners by using the following acronyms, again inspired by primary mainstream education:

- **WALTs** – we are learning to . . .
- **WILFs** – what I’m looking for . . .

Such a framing approach enables primary children to perceive their learning as purposeful and coherent which in turn enhances their metacognitive awareness. Rixon (2012) adds

- **WAGOLL** – what a good one looks like

Thus, this underlines the crucial importance of providing models and robust scaffolding when enabling children to achieve lesson outcomes. Use of varied formative assessment tools in EELT fosters a far greater age-appropriate and child-friendly approach to assessment when compared to daunting high-stakes English language examinations. Practitioners should also recognise the particular value of embedding systematic use of learning portfolios which involve primary learners in decision making regarding which work is to be included as well as providing the children with a tangible sense of progress (Ellis and Ibrahim 2015, Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou 2003). As to how extensively these ‘new’ types of assessment are ultimately adopted in EELT curricula will depend on the particular learning context, as with all the innovations we are proposing in this chapter.

Future directions

Values education in EELT

It is increasingly common in international EELT coursebooks to see a ‘values related’ lesson in each unit with fostering empathy, resolution of conflict and empowering children to be responsible citizens as frequent examples (Hird 2016). As we highlighted previously, coursebooks often are interpreted by schools, teachers and parents/caregivers as the actual syllabus. Therefore, such a ‘values’ focused trend is worthy of serious attention, particularly
given the numerous contexts worldwide where teachers are currently not provided with adequate support or CPD, including how to incorporate values education in their schemes of work. Given the level of global conflict coupled with the increasing rhetoric of hate in many contexts, incorporating a robust values education focus in EELT is laudable; however, it may result in a somewhat limited and tokenistic values syllabus grafted on almost as an afterthought, which would be counterproductive to developing children’s intercultural competence (Kramsch 1993). Furthermore, incorporating values education in EELT is not without controversy, with many questions surrounding the issue, such as: what values should be taught? Whose values are they? Do ‘global values’ exist? Best EELT practice also maintains that children should be given age-relevant choices to accept or reject particular values. This respects their rights as learners, and pedagogical approaches should influence them to make informed choices (Bilsborough 2016).

Based on insights from research conducted on mainstream education in the UK and Australia where a whole school approach to modelling values in primary level curricula and schemes of work has been successfully adopted, Read (2018) has developed a flexible ‘pedagogy of values’ according to the following principles:

• Encourage children to notice values.
• Help them to understand reasons for particular values.
• Encourage them to reflect on their own and others’ values.

She emphasizes the need for this to remain fully age appropriate as focusing on values with a five-year-old is very different from doing so with a 10-year-old. Read goes on to highlight the usefulness of discovery learning and advises EELT practitioners to avoid being overly quick to explain values. Such discovery approaches in schemes of work act as springboards into values education, and practitioners can make use of picturebooks and storytelling as well as discussion and personalization via drama and role play (but never in a vacuum) to open up thinking around values in the safe environment of the classroom.

**Integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals**

Closely related to children’s rights is the need to enable them to consider their futures by tackling poverty, caring for the environment and ensuring prosperity, as reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These ‘global goals’ can be used in age-accessible ways in EELT to raise children’s awareness of key issues while drawing on the language support approach to simultaneously develop their creativity, critical thinking and language skills. Real, meaningful and up-to-date content is once again clearly the driver for course design by using the SDGs as ‘entry points’ into lessons. Read (2017) has developed materials aimed at upper primary children which provide EELT practitioners inspiration and a flexible framework for developing their own contextually relevant schemes of work around the SDGs. She makes use of freely downloadable Getty Images to raise children’s awareness of world problems and convey meaning of related lexis. Circle time can also be used to enable children to predict the goals while fostering respect for diverse opinions, turn-taking and active-listening sub-skills. Read’s (ibid., p. 18) ‘global goals spider gram’ provides an opportunity for children to create their own goals, which develops higher order thinking skills and enables them to further personalise content and language in a contextually relevant manner. While EELT practitioners may feel raising children’s awareness of the SDGs is complex and daunting, the creative approaches outlined above demonstrate...
the far-reaching potential achievable in EELT classrooms. It is also an important reminder of the need to avoid underestimating what children are capable of and to provide them with plenty of opportunities for creative exploration in curricula and related schemes of work.

**Children’s voices in EELT**

Throughout this chapter, we have been focusing on the need for a critical analysis of the way teaching and learning in EELT are organised, and while teacher support and optimising learning are both crucial, all too often children’s voices are absent from the discussion. Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (2010) affirms that, ‘You have the right to give your opinion and for adults to listen and take it seriously’. The idea of ‘mainstreaming’ in EELT means developing curricula and schemes of work with related classroom routines and procedures where children’s voices are included as a norm. This further underlines the importance of providing choice and reflective reviewing in age-relevant ways and makes the notion of ‘needs analysis’ and ‘the negotiated syllabus’ (both commonplace in adult and secondary ELT) an age-accessible reality for children in EELT. This enables them to become active and questioning participants in and contributors to their own learning process. By becoming involved in curricula-related decision making, children’s motivation for learning English increases as well as develops their collaborative learning and communication skills (Bilsborough 2016; Ellis and Ibrahim 2015). There is an increasing body of innovative EELT research which foregrounds children’s voices (Pinter et al. 2013; Pinter et al. 2016). Classroom practitioners, academic managers, private education providers and ministries of education need to listen to their voices and make them the starting point for decision making around EELT curricula and schemes of work, for this is the very essence of genuine child-centredness.

**Further reading**


   The chapter on materials evaluation and design includes the integration of a topic and content-based syllabus both with published coursebooks and authentic, age-appropriate texts. It also includes an explicit focus on integrating twenty-first century skills in syllabus design.


   This book unpacks the pedagogical principles underpinning the integration of learning to learn in primary ELT syllabus design. It also includes a range of pedagogical routines and practical strategies to scaffold the implementation of learning to learn in everyday primary ELT classroom practice.


   The tasks and activity cycles included in this chapter demonstrate to teachers of upper primary ways to integrate a focus on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into the ELT syllabus in age-accessible ways.

4 Onestopenglish – Amazing World of Animals

   This subscription site with a project on wild animals for young learners provides a blueprint for teachers of primary ELT aiming to use topic-, project- and content-based learning in their syllabuses and schemes of work. www.onestopenglish.com/clil/young-learners/animals/project-amazing-world-of-animals/

5 Onestopenglish – Amazing World of Food
This subscription site with a project on food for young learners provides a blueprint for teachers of primary ELT aiming to use topic-, project- and content-based learning in their syllabuses and schemes of work. www.onestopenglish.com/clil/young-learners/science/food/project-amazing-world-of-food/  

6 TeachingEnglish – Promoting Diversity Through Children’s Literature  
This site provides primary ELT practitioners freely downloadable materials based on a story-based syllabus. The teachers’ notes demonstrate how to use picturebooks as the basis of an ELT syllabus as well as to develop children’s awareness of values education issues such as equality, inclusion, racism, recycling, climate and responsible consumption. http://tinyurl.com/z9pz7jn

Related topics
Assessment, materials, grammar, vocabulary, speaking and listening, reading and writing

References
Syllabus development in EELT


