Teaching English to young learners in Europe

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the history and development of Early English Language Learning in Europe.

The historical period in focus is the four decades from the 1980s to the time of writing, although the context for this period is provided in discussion of developments in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Research and development dating from the decade of 2006 to 2016 is highlighted in Section 4: Current Contributions and Research.

The term Early Language Learning in this chapter covers children of any age up to about 11, which in many countries is the upper limit for what is variously termed ‘primary’ or ‘elementary’ education. It therefore also takes in pre-primary school language learning, which has become increasingly important in Europe in recent years. According to the definition used by Doyé and Hurrell (1997), writing of The Council of Europe Modern Languages Programme, the years of primary level education in Europe fall between the ages of 5–6 and 10–11, although in some countries children remain in the same institution until the age of 12–13. The focus of this chapter is on English teaching and learning in the state school sector, although in some countries interaction with a vigorous system of private provision is also relevant.

The term Europe has both geographical and political connotations. For the purposes of this chapter, Europe is considered to be those countries which currently fall within the European Economic Area (EEA). This includes members of the European Union (EU), plus three countries which are part of the European Union’s single market although they are not EU members. Switzerland is not part of either the EU or the EEA but is clearly within the geographical territory commonly accepted as Europe and is also part of the single market, which means that its nationals have the same rights of movement and residence as EU members. Over the historical period discussed, the EU has gained a considerable number of members so that statistics may not always allow for a comparison of like with like at different points in time. However, the very useful documentation dealing with school level education published since 1980 under the name of Eurydice, now part of the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) in the EEA region, has made provision for information
on EEA countries and on other countries prior to their accession to the EU. This means that when using this source comparisons may be made safely between one period and another.

At the time of writing in 2016, the EU countries were: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Republic of Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and the UK.

The EEA but not EU member countries were Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway. Switzerland, neither an EEA nor an EU country, is also included in this account.

**Historical perspectives**

For the period discussed, developments in the teaching of English need to be considered alongside the teaching of other languages. This is firstly because in a region of such cultural and linguistic diversity the choices to be made have always been amongst many candidates. Secondly, it is only in the years since the Second World War that English has been moving into its present position of very high priority within most school curricula, largely owing to growing US influence on industry, world politics and the media (Graddol 2000, p. 7). Thirdly, despite the growth of the appeal of English, the predominant philosophy within European institutions with a social or educational remit is one of plurilingualism.

**From 1900 to the end of the Second World War**

Although English had been present in many curricula since the late nineteenth century, when industrialisation and increases in international trade made command of ‘living/modern’ rather than ‘dead/classical’ languages a priority for most, it had not, during the first 40 years of the twentieth century, assumed the important role in public and government attention within Europe that it has today. Additionally, the norm at that time was for foreign language learning to be reserved for secondary level education, which was not available to all.

**From 1950–1979**

After the Second World War, in Europe many states underwent massive reorganisation, which included educational systems and the role of foreign language learning within them. In territories in Eastern Europe with new or existing affiliations to the Soviet Union, Russian became the dominant foreign language taught and from 1949 was also taught at the primary school level in most of these countries (Eurydice 2001, p. 49). In Western Europe, foreign languages tended still to be reserved for secondary school learning until a movement for change in the 1960s. The main impetus seems to have been widespread dissatisfaction with the attainments of learners who were taught languages at secondary school. Rationales for lowering the starting age for foreign language centred around, firstly, a view that devoting more school years to the process would raise standards and, secondly, a belief, stimulated by first- and second-language acquisition research of the time (e.g., Penfield 1953) that younger children would have superior capacities for learning languages in instructional situations.

In 1961, the Second Conference of European Ministers of Education in held in Hamburg included the following statement (Council of Europe 1961) as part of its *Resolution No. 6 on the Expansion and Improvement of Modern Language Teaching*:

Experience in certain European countries has shown that a great extension of the teaching of modern languages is practicable. This seems to hold good also for relatively
young pupils. The Ministers recommend that periodical surveys be made in each country in order to ascertain the proportion of children following modern language courses. The results should be published in order to show the progress made.

Stern and Weinrib (1977, p. 6) record two international meetings in 1962 and 1966 organised by UNESCO at their Institute for Education in Hamburg at which similar emphasis was given to the need to gather empirical evidence for the optimum starting age as well as survey evidence on the actual state of language teaching in territories worldwide. However, in much of Europe, evaluation of primary school language teaching during this period was often frustrated either by the lack of contexts in which substantial and systematic teaching for a significant amount of time had taken place or by lack of systematic data collection (ibid., p. 6).

A contrast, in terms of planned evaluation and systematic research methodology, was provided by an experiment in England and Wales during that time. The ‘French from Eight’ project, whose piloting began in 1963, is still one of the best-known and most influential sets of research into primary level foreign language teaching. However, the interpretation put on the data in the final report (Burstall et al. 1974) was, and remains, controversial. The key finding, that by the age of 16 participants in the project differed in no significant way in attainment from children who had started French only at secondary school, resulted in the abandonment of the project after loss of government support. This research and its outcome were widely debated, and the findings were by no means accepted by all (Bennett 1975; Buckby 1976). They seem not to have had a dampening effect on piloting and research concerning early language learning in other regions.

A European symposium held in Copenhagen in September 1976 (Council of Europe 1977) involving representatives from 22 Western European countries was evidence of continued interest. As a lead-in to the symposium, P.H. Hoy, an Inspector of Schools from the UK and early member of the committee of the International Association of Teachers as a Foreign Language (IATEFL), conducted a questionnaire-based survey whose results suggested ‘that the European picture is one of a general trend towards lowering the starting age for modern languages’ (Hoy 1975). The debate remained alive, however. As Stern and Weinrib (1977, p. 15) expressed it, findings so far:

all point in the same direction: the provision of languages in the education of younger children has not come to be considered the sine qua non of effective language learning over the last 25 years.

**The period 1980–2016**

Despite the caution from Stern and other authorities, interest in implementing primary school foreign language teaching at nationwide levels gained new vigour during the 1980s, with greater interest and intervention by national politicians and administrations. This was often accompanied by a focus on the teaching of English. As has been documented by Graddol (2006, p. 88), this may partly be accounted for by the rise in the influence of English as a global language.

The narrative of the development of English for Young Learners in Europe from this point onwards is extremely complex, with the many internal changes in political and economic alignment in the region and an increasing number of states joining what was to become the European Union. That is even without considering the different ways in which
school systems are structured within individual countries and the different phases of piloting and experimentation that may precede official ratification of the introduction of primary foreign languages. The passing of a law or decree to give foreign language teaching a place in primary school has not always coincided with its actual active presence, and there has often been language teaching activity before full official recognition was obtained. Detailed chronology and statistics are obtainable from two very useful sets of documents from the Council of Europe, available online. These are the Eurydice 2001 document *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe* and the Eurydice *Key Data on Teaching Languages in Europe* series, with volumes published about every four years. The most recent at the time of writing was that for 2012.

In the 1980s and 1990s, countries such as Austria, Italy and France were amongst the first to lower the starting age for foreign language learning. This was after extended periods of pilot or experimental teaching. The change of starting age was radical, with children starting English or another language several years younger than the previous norm of 11 or 12.

In the Scandinavian countries, the lowering of the starting age was normally gradual with changes only of a year or so made at any one time. For example, in Denmark with the 1994 *folkeskole* reform, the starting age was reduced by one year and English became compulsory from the fourth to the ninth year.

The breakup of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 led to wide-ranging political and administrative changes in countries which had, after the Second World War, been under Soviet rule or direct influence. One manifestation of this change in many cases was a rejection of the teaching of Russian in schools and a massive retraining of teachers of Russian to teach other languages, usually English. Since Russian was already being taught in primary schools, this left an opening for the teaching of other languages at this level and in countries such as Hungary and Poland, and major changes in pre-service and in-service training took place (see Pugsley and Kershaw 1996 for a summary). During this period, financial and advisory support for countries in this region became abundantly available from the outside world with, for example, funding from the British Foreign Office and the British Council ELTECs (English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme) fostering travel and professional support for teachers, together with similar aid from the USA and loans from the World Bank for the creation and publication of new teaching materials. Much of this funding had an impact that also affected primary English language education.

Within the European Union, the Lingua programme was adopted in July 1989 and came into force on January 1, 1990, with the aim of improving the amount and quality of language teaching in the area. The programme was later (1995) integrated within the broader Socrates programme. Through these schemes, provision was made for co-operation amongst EU countries to promote the teaching and learning of languages. In addition to the actions in Lingua, other actions of the Socrates programme such as Comenius (cooperation in school education) also had a language teaching dimension.

It should be noted that the major movement in the period between the late 1990s and the present has been towards plurilingualism. In most countries pupils have the chance to study several languages during their school career. Currently, in almost all countries except the UK, learning a first foreign language is compulsory at the primary school level, with a second language in place certainly in the early years of secondary school and in several cases starting in primary school. (Within the UK, Scotland is alone in promoting two languages at the primary level from 2017 onwards.) In the year 1998–1999 (*Eurydice 2001*, p. 96) eight countries (Denmark, Greece, the Netherlands, Sweden, Liechtenstein, Norway, Cyprus and Latvia) had already made English the first compulsory foreign language at primary school,
and in other countries where there was a choice of first foreign language English was by far the most chosen.

In 2004, the following countries joined the European Union: Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. Accession to the EU seems to have coincided in many cases with a rise in their take up of English at primary school level (Eurydice 2012, p. 61). The two most dramatic rises over this period were in Slovenia (from 11.1% to 49%) and in Poland (50.7% to 88%). Steep rises, of 20–30 percentage points, were also recorded for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The position in Cyprus and Malta where, owing to previous colonial contacts with the UK, English was already an important curricular subject, was little changed. During the same period, Iceland and Croatia also experienced steep rises in take up of English. Overall, in the five years between 2004–2005 and 2009–2010 there was an increase from about 60.7% of primary pupils over the whole European area learning English to about 73% in 2009–2010 (Eurydice 2012, pp. 60–61). These figures are rendered more striking if it is considered that they are calculated based on the total numbers of pupils at that time in primary education, not all of whom would have started a language yet, and that increases were generally the result of lowering the age at which English was started. By 2010, English was already the most widely taught foreign language in primary education in almost all education systems. Exceptions were the Flemish Community of Belgium and in Luxembourg, in both of which French and German were compulsory.

Developments in the teaching of English in pre-primary education

The 1998 publication (Blondin et al. 2008) Foreign Languages in Primary and Pre-School Education: Contexts and Outcomes, intended for policy makers and administrators, evidenced a growing interest in teaching very young children. However, the Eurydice document of 2001 reported little foreign language teaching at the pre-primary level. This was soon to change. By the time of the data collection in 2011–2012 leading to the report in a British Council survey (Rixon 2013), the signs of activity were evident enough for the researcher to include specific questions about this area. The results worldwide showed significant interest in English teaching at the pre-school level, and this was particularly the case in the European countries covered, with responses from some countries, such as Croatia, suggesting very considerable coverage at an official level, while in others, such as the Czech Republic, although English was not yet a compulsory part of the state Early Years curriculum, it was very frequently taught.

Where pre-primary education was not part of the state-supported system, there were also reports of English being offered at pre-school levels in private institutions, for example in Greece. In 2014, after the publication of the survey, British Council Teaching Centres in the EU began offering courses for children as young as two years old.

Critical issues and topics

English in a Europe which values multilingualism

It should always be remembered that developments within Europe take place among a set of highly diverse countries with extremely different historical backgrounds, economic fortunes and cultural assumptions. The teaching of English in Europe is part of a wider spectrum of language learning, conditioned by the policy in almost all countries, since the
Resolution of the Council of Europe of 1995, to ensure that all pupils study at least two foreign languages during their school years. An additional factor in some countries is the existence of more than one local language or language variety to which proper attention must be also paid. This commitment to multilingualism could be seen to be endangered if one language gains too great a dominance over others in school-based learning. For example, in some of the countries where Russian once dominated the primary and secondary languages syllabus, it has been noted that the aspiration for all EU children to learn two languages in addition to the mother tongue has become attenuated, and in practical terms English is the single language of choice. See Bruen and Sheridan (2016), for example, for a discussion of the situation in the ex-German Democratic Republic region and Hungary. In the Foreword to the document ‘Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe’ (Eurydice 2001, p. 3) Viviane Reding, then European Commissioner for Education and Culture, acknowledges the issue as follows:

what is required to ensure that the consistently strong preference among pupils for learning English, or even the status of English as the first compulsory foreign language, do not compromise preservation of the linguistic and cultural diversity of Europe?

**Optimum age or optimum conditions?**

One issue has remained constant for at least the past 50 years: that is the assumption, at least in non-expert circles, that beginning to learn another language at a young age is a powerful guarantee of success. More extreme forms of this view hold that success will be limited unless the learner starts young (the so-called ‘younger the better’ view). Most experts, both linguists and educationists, have long ago moved on from and refined such age-dominated/biological development concepts as that of a Critical Period (Lenneberg 1967) or even a Sensitive Period (Oyama, 1976). See Singleton and Lengyel (1995) and Johnstone (2002), for example, for further discussion. Such views have nonetheless frequently been used by politicians and administrators to support an early start in foreign or second language learning in schools. Specialists today are careful to factor in with the age of the learners the peculiar conditions and multiple variables offered by instructed school-based learning. Optimum conditions include adequate exposure to the language within the curriculum, activities which are engaging and lead to interaction and, above all, language use that is meaningful to the learners (see Rixon (2000) for a summary of these issues).

However, while politicians, parents and members of the public still press for an ever-earlier start to foreign language learning, even when favourable conditions are difficult to set up, the comment by Stern and Weinrib (1977, pp. 19–20) is worth reflecting on:

An understanding of the role of a second language in a community, and an appreciation of its educational and cultural value are perhaps more important than the search for a psychologically or biologically optimal age.

**Purposes for teaching foreign languages at primary school level**

The pro-forma used by ‘Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe’ (Eurydice 2001) for gathering information concerning objectives for primary school language learning
unsurprisingly asks for responses concerning linguistic/grammatical objectives, but other objectives are also included as key:

- Reflecting on language.
- Sociocultural aspects (knowledge of other cultures, understanding people from other cultures).
- Cognitive and affective aspects (fostering independent learning, fostering personality development).

This may be considered good evidence of what is agreed to be of value in an ‘ideal’ delivery of a foreign language programme. However, it is notable that not all countries have responded concerning the aspects listed above.

**Teacher supply and education needs**

A much-debated issue in Europe is who is the most appropriate figure to teach primary school children a language. Eurydice (2001, p. 114) sets up a typology of eligible teachers:

- Generalist teacher: a teacher qualified to teach all subjects in the curriculum, including foreign language(s).
- Semi-specialist teacher: a teacher qualified to teach a group of subjects including foreign language(s); s/he may be in charge of foreign language(s) exclusively or several other subjects as well.
- Specialist subject teacher: a teacher qualified to teach one or several foreign languages.

A frequent debate concerning teachers of English is about the benefits of ensuring that a generalist primary school teacher, in the form of the children’s own ‘home room’ teacher, has a subject repertoire that includes English, compared with the value of bringing in a specialist English teacher whose experience may not have previously included teaching younger children. The British Council survey (Rixon 2013, pp. 20–23) revealed different responses to this issue. Frequently all three of the possible solutions above were in place.

Whatever the preference regarding the ideal figure as teacher, one of the greatest obstacles to smooth implementation of a programme of English for younger children is the shortage of sufficiently qualified and competent teachers of any sort, especially when the demand is suddenly increased by a hurried lowering of the starting age. We may take as an example the case of Italy where in 1992 one foreign language was made compulsory in primary school, from the age of seven onward (Eurydice 2001, p. 56). However, several years later, in 1998/1999 when the data for the 2001 report was collected, a shortage of adequately qualified teachers meant that only 65% of schools were able to implement the policy.

In the 1990s, in countries such as Hungary and Poland, in response to the decision to teach other languages than Russian in schools, measures were taken to increase the numbers of appropriately trained primary school language teachers through setting up new initial teacher training courses and institutions as well as in-service courses, but this wholesale approach has not applied across the whole European region. As Enever (2014) notes, in spite of the creation of the European Profile for Language Teacher Education (Kelly and Grenfell 2004), which might be thought to encourage greater consistency, the teacher education picture varies, and in some countries pre-service teacher training courses for primary level
may contain little or no specific preparation for the role of language teacher. Additionally, in-service courses may contain very diverse subject matter and often present problems of access or of timing from the point of view of would-be trainees (Enever 2014).

Attempted solutions to difficulties with supply of suitable teachers include officially or unofficially allowing people without required qualifications or skills to teach a language. Even in more recent years, experts from some of the European countries covered by the British Council survey (Rixon 2013, p. 27) reported such compromises:

Although the required qualifications to that effect are stated by the Ministry of Education, the shortage of qualified teachers has led it to taking applicants on the basis of their ‘relevant curricula’ which have been judged continuously. Such practice has proved that some applicants lack both academic and pedagogical qualifications and have been taken as teachers at this level.

(Portugal)

**Transition between levels of schooling as a major factor in ultimate success**

As early as the report by Burstall et al. (1974) the importance was emphasised of giving a positive reception at the next level of schooling to children’s primary school linguistic attainments and of the need to build on them rather than ignore them. The problem has been referred to many times and in many other contexts since then. In the British Council survey (Rixon 2013, pp. 39–40) the same issues seemed apparent, with only a few reports (Rixon 2013, p. 220) of positive measures in place, such as teachers from both levels meeting in order to ensure continuity and appreciation of children’s attainments so far.

**Social equity in access to English – public and private provision**

The social and social-symbolic value of a knowledge of English as a badge conveying a good standard of education and a key to success has been a widely experienced phenomenon for some time (Rogers 1982). In some societies, however, truly effective English language teaching is a scarce resource. This can lead to serious ethical considerations and social discontent when what is considered good quality English teaching is available only to the economically affluent who can pay for private tuition but is also desired by those less privileged.

Such perceptions of English as a necessity for success in life often result in parents making financial sacrifices to support their offspring that are out of proportion to what an informed valuation of the power of an early start can logically support. The dynamics between public and private provision in some countries thus are vivid and the source of much discussion.

A factor for the history of EYL in Europe has been the existence in some countries, at least since the end of the Second World War, of a vigorous tradition of teaching English as a foreign language in the private sector. Children whose parents could afford it were often learners of English at these institutions even in the years before English became part of the primary school curriculum. In the British Council Survey (Rixon 2013, p. 44), there were reports of high attendance at private language institutes from five of the European contexts responding. It was claimed that in Croatia and Spain between 40% and 59% primary-aged children attended private language institutes. The claim for Cyprus, Greece and Serbia was
that over 60% attended private language institutes. From Greece in 2012 the comment was ‘English is considered to be an unimportant subject at school as it is seriously offered at private language institutions’. By contrast, in other contexts such as Finland (Rixon 2013, p. 105) there is confidence in the quality of public provision which means that almost no children study English at private language institutes. Similarly, the comment from Sweden (Rixon 2013, p. 218) was ‘There is no market for private language institutions in Sweden’.

**Suitable methodological choices**

According to Eurydice (2001, p. 158), in most contexts in Europe a version of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is explicitly or implicitly recommended for primary school language teaching. It is doubtful, however, whether this is actually in place, considering the difficulties of defining the approach and above all the generally low levels of training in language teaching methodology of many of the teachers concerned. We also need to consider that CLT was developed with adults in mind and would need considerable modifications to become ‘child-friendly’.

It might be more accurate to say that where teaching languages to children has been successful, methodological principles have been developed from experience and have often involved putting good general primary school educational practice to the service of language learning. In these ‘child-friendly’ approaches, communication and meaningful language use have been dominant without the methodology necessarily aligning itself with mainstream CLT. As an example, since the 1970s, language teaching to children in Croatia with the work of the late professor Mirjana Vilke and colleagues in English, French, German and Italian has become emblematic of an integrated playful approach which is yet systematic in its underlying planning. It has also been carefully researched as to its results (Vilke 1998).

In other cases, adaptations of mainstream primary teaching practices have been made for the teaching of English. Topic-based teaching, once the main framework for mainstream primary school teaching in the UK, was promoted in the early 1990s through teaching materials (e.g., Stepping Stones, Collins 1991). What this and other approaches such as story-based teaching and CLIL (discussed below) have in common is that the activities involved are intended to engage attention and rouse interest and the language is used in a way that is meaningful to the child rather than presented as a set of exponents of a linguistic system.

Teaching based on storytelling, such as is advocated by Garvie (1989), has been highly effective in EAL contexts in the UK, but this approach needs to be distinguished from teaching using picture-story books as a starting point and stimulus. This latter approach has been more widely discussed in the European context and in some places is highly developed. In 1991, Ellis and Brewster published a highly influential handbook on storybook use, with a revised version a decade later (Ellis and Brewster 2002). Since this time, numerous publications with a European focus (e.g., Enever and Schmid-Schönbeim 2006) have reported on research and classroom experiences with both storybook use and storytelling.

Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) traces its origins to innovations in Finland in the early 1990s (Coyle et al. 2010) and has since been promoted worldwide. The 2012 Key Data report (Eurydice 2012) claims that in all EEA countries, except Denmark, Greece and Iceland, some schools give students the opportunity to have CLIL-type provision. However, it seems to take place in limited areas, and outside these focal zones numbers are very small and the provision patchy. Examples where the willingness of authorities to devote resources has contributed to success have been projects with the Ministry of Education and British Council in Spain, starting in 1996, in the Basque country and Slovakia. It is only
in Belgium (German-speaking community), Luxembourg and Malta that all schools operate on a ‘CLIL’ basis, in which English is involved as well as other languages. Trentino, in Northern Italy, and Switzerland are notable for the literature that has been based on CLIL activity and research in their schools (see Lucietto 2008). More recently (Rixon 2013, p. 9) a CLIL approach in primary schools has received official support in Cyprus. For a collection of case studies and accounts of experiences from European contexts, see Ioannou-Georgiou and Pavlou (2011) and Bentley (2015).

It is probably true to say that although the approaches above have been influential and are much discussed in the literature, outside high-profile projects they may not be greatly in evidence at the level of day-to-day teaching. This is possibly because of the high levels of language competence required on the part of the teacher in order to sustain the flexible exchanges with pupils essential to such approaches. Enever (2014), using the findings from the ELLiE study of seven European countries (see Current Contributions and Research below), comments:

> classroom observations throughout the ELLiE study indicated that not all teachers had the necessary FL [Foreign Language] skills for the types of classroom interaction needed with this primary age group.

**Language level goals and age-appropriate assessment**

Although collections of research papers on assessment have been published since the early twenty-first century (e.g., Rea-Dickins 2000) with an increase in interest in the second decade of the century (e.g., Nikolov 2015), the issues of appropriate approaches to the assessment of language learning in young children are far from settled.

Since its publication, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for Languages (Council of Europe 2001) has been used in most European countries as a way of expressing goals for language attainment at the end of primary schooling. Most have chosen the A1 or A2 level (Rixon 2013, p. 35). However, it should be remembered, as discussed by, e.g., Hasselgren (2005), McKay (2006) and Enever (2011, p. 34), that as yet there is no version of CEFR adapted for the capacities and centres of interest of children. The current use of CEFR levels to define goals for English at primary school should therefore be taken as only a rough guide to aspirations. In most countries, assessment to determine if the level is reached takes place within the school.

Approaches to classroom assessment thought to be suited to primary school aged children have been described (Rea-Dickins and Rixon 1997) but tend to be time-consuming and are often based on one-on-one interactions. There is thus a tension, even for highly motivated and skilled professionals, between what is optimal and what is practically feasible in the allocated time. A phenomenon noted in the late twentieth century (Rea-Dickins and Rixon 1999), but continuing into the twenty-first (Brumen et al. 2009), is the mismatch between stated aims of primary language teaching and the assessment methods and instruments used by teachers. The most common mismatch (found in all the studies mentioned above) has been the use for assessment of classroom ‘pencil and paper’ tests which were heavily dependent on reading and writing, despite the teachers’ stated interest in developing oral and aural skills. On the other hand, in assessment used for research and project evaluation purposes, where more resources of time and expertise are usually available, some highly innovative and child-friendly instruments have been created, particularly in Norway (Hasselgren 2000) and as part of the ELLie project (Szpotowicz and Lindgren 2011).
At the time of writing, modern mainstream educational developments of formative assessment such as assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam 1998), which puts emphasis on supporting children in reflection, self-assessment and deciding their own next learning steps, have reached the young learners literature (e.g., Rixon 2015) but are not yet widely established in classrooms. On the other hand, portfolio work which also encourages reflection and self-assessment by the children is more widespread and is supported by the various locally adapted versions of the Junior Version of the European Languages Passport (ELP), which is calibrated with the CEFR. For an example from Norway, see: http://elp.ecml.at/Portals/1/documents/Norway-100-2009-Model-for-young-learners-aged-6-12.pdf. It should be pointed out that the ELP, in keeping with the plurilingual ambitions in Europe, is a useful tool for building a profile of a child’s capacities in several languages and is not intended as an instrument for assessment of English or any other language alone.

**Current contributions and research**

From the late 1980s until the end of the twentieth century there were numerous surveys and state of the art articles concerning early language learning (e.g., Rixon 1992, Kubanek-German 1998, Rixon 2000; Moon and Nikolov 2000). More recently, there have been volumes giving detailed accounts of experiments or projects in specific countries. Rich (2014) contains chapters covering experiences in Poland and Germany, while Bland (2015) covers issues and research with a particularly European focus. Examples of volumes reporting research on specific topics are Nikolov 2015 on approaches to assessment and Wilden and Porsch (2017) on teacher education for primary school English teaching. Most of the discussions in these two volumes are focused on European case studies or examples.

**What is feasible for children to achieve in normal instructional conditions?**

One of the most significant contributions in recent years concerning the teaching of English in Europe has been the longitudinal comparative study of language teaching and learning in seven European countries (Croatia, England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden) led by Enever under the auspices of the Council of Europe (Enever 2011). This study has provided data on the conditions and results of ordinary classroom learning of English in continental Europe that have already engendered numerous articles and will furnish material for discussion for many years.

With the increase of interest in pre-school learning of English in the twenty-first century has come an increase of research into this age group as language learners, much of it focused on work in Europe (see Mourão and Lourenço 2015).

**Recommendations for practice**

The following recommendations are derived from the discussions above.

Governments and administrations should consider the resource implications of any change in the stage of schooling at which English is introduced. Experience and research have shown that short-term hurried changes are unlikely to be implemented as intended or to have the desired impact.

More successful learning outcomes are regularly associated with approaches and methods in which activities are intrinsically engaging, have meaning for the learners and foster
interactions in the target language. However, successful teaching of this sort requires fluency and confidence in target language use on the part of the teacher.

Assessment practices and instruments should fit with the style and the goals of primary school English teaching and be based more on observation and sampling of work than on pencil-and-paper tests.

It is particularly important to confront the problems of transition from pre-school to primary levels of education, already a lingering problem with the move from primary to secondary level.

**Future directions**

*The post-Brexit fortunes of English as a foreign language in European schools*

It is an obvious irony that in June 2016 the result of a referendum held in the UK was that the then UK government expressed its intention to leave the EU – so-called Brexit. Thus, a major English-speaking country and major reference point for many teachers of English in Europe elected to part company with Europe in the political and economic sense. It seems unlikely, since English remains a global lingua franca, that this will affect the take-up of English as the main foreign language learning option for primary school children in Europe, but the nature of continuing co-operation between the European Union and the UK in the field of English language learning is an area that will merit attention. It may be less likely that major research projects such as the ELLie project, discussed above, funded by the European Commission and initiated from the UK, will be part of the future.

*Increased pre-school teaching of English*

It is highly likely that the push for starting English teaching at ever-younger ages will continue. More research is needed not only into appropriate approaches for children as young as two or three but into what aspects of English language learning are feasible to address in instructional situations with very young children and how their achievements can be validly and reliably measured for research purposes. The drive to provide commercially available tests of English for younger and younger children has so far stopped short of this age group, but increased teaching may result in attempts by testing bodies to capitalise on this level.

*More appropriate specification of goals for young learners of English*

Work that has started on adapting the CEFR to reflect the interests and capacities of children under 12 will, once completed, provide a framework for more realistic goal-setting and support those attempting to devise more appropriate instruments for assessing their English attainments and supporting its progress.

*Online and blended learning routes to teacher education*

Different, accessible and affordable, ways need to be sought of supporting teachers both at pre-service and in-service levels in language and methodological preparation. Online and blended learning courses in areas such as Early Childhood Language Learning (e.g., The Norwich Institute for Language Education 2016) are starting to cater to Teacher Subject
Knowledge and have been shown to be effective. These along with free online MOOCs (Massive Online Open Courses; e.g., futurelearn and the British Council 2017) seem to offer viable and affordable sources of continuous professional development for primary school teachers of English in Europe.

Further reading


Fifteen chapters by different authors, covering topics related to the teaching of English to preschool and primary school aged children, many with a focus on classroom activities such as the use of drama, storybooks, CLIL, task-based learning and portfolio-based assessment.

Eurydice Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe 2012.

Key Data reports are published every three to four years. This most recent one at the time of writing provides a useful snapshot of the situation regarding the teaching of all languages in the then 27 member countries of the European Union, plus Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey.


One of the first works to focus specifically on the teaching of English to children under six years old. The contexts covered are mainly European.

Related topics

The age debate, contexts of learning, CLIL, assessment, language policy, learning through literature, teacher education

References


