Primary ELT
Issues and trends
Janet Enever

Introduction
This chapter sets out to identify current issues and major trends in primary ELT today. The scope is global, reflecting the large-scale reform that has occurred in primary school curricula worldwide over the past fifty years regarding the teaching of English as a second or foreign language (Cha and Ham, 2008: 317). In this chapter, I focus principally on contexts where English has recently been introduced as a new curriculum subject regionally or nationally in primary schools, examining learning in instructed or formal contexts rather than language development in the more naturalistic environment of the home or family. Given the limited space and the huge scale of reform, I will only touch briefly on contexts where English has been the medium of instruction (EMI) during former periods of colonial influence (e.g. parts of Africa, India, Hong Kong).

The trend towards an early start for primary-level English now appears to be fairly settled at something between the ages of 6 and 9 years old (Rixon, 2013), although there are discussions about a still earlier start of 3 to 4 years old in some pre-primary contexts (Lee, 2009; Rokita-Jaskow, 2013). Here, I use the term primary to indicate the age range 5/6 – 11/12 years old, although terminology for this first phase of schooling can vary across countries and may be known elsewhere as elementary, basic, lower primary or other similar terminology (Ellis, 2014). The chapter following this focuses on the older secondary or teenage phase of schooling, from 12 years old upwards (see Pinter, this volume). Possibly this older age group should no longer be described as ‘young learners’ – at least, with regard to ELT.

Policy developments over time
From the early part of the twentieth century, foreign languages have been taught in primary schools. Initially, this tended to occur only in a small number of elite or private schools worldwide. While EMI is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is important to note that English as the language of schooling was present in the majority of schools established in the former colonies of the United Kingdom, ranging from India to parts of Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong and the West Indies, amongst others. On gaining independence, some countries made the decision to establish schooling in a regional or national language, while others have retained a stronger presence of English; for further reading see, for example, Makoni and Makoni (2009); Meganathan (2011).
From 1960–1970, some interest in an early start to foreign language teaching/learning was evident in Europe, with a number of small-scale pilot studies conducted in various European languages, often initiated by university-based applied linguists (Vilke, 2007). These projects lost direction, however, as a result of a pilot study publication in England which reported that there was no advantage to be gained by an early start at primary level (Burstall et al., 1974). Despite subsequent weaknesses identified in the interpretation of the research findings (see Gamble and Smalley, 1975 for a critique of the findings), the publication of the Burstall Report precipitated the closure of many similar projects across Europe.

During the late 1980s, a new wave of initiatives for introducing primary ELT began to emerge as a result of major political and policy reforms across the world. The first wave of initiatives was precipitated by the political changes in Eastern Europe following the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, resulting in the almost universal introduction of English, firstly at secondary school level, then subsequently at primary level, across the former Soviet bloc countries of Eastern Europe and countries of the former Yugoslavia. The unprecedented scale of reform in the rush towards English has been consolidated over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, as huge populations of primary-aged children across Asia (including former colonies where English has been retained or has been newly introduced at early primary level), together with other Eastern European and Latin American countries, have begun to learn English, increasingly from the first phase of compulsory schooling or earlier (see Butler, 2015 for an overview of East Asian developments in particular). Cautiously, it can now be proposed that this trend is becoming established as an accepted strand of early primary education. However, future-gazing in matters concerning language policy is a notoriously precarious and very political business (Grin, 2003: 5) with nothing remaining ‘fixed’ for very long.

**Contexts for primary ELT**

The introductory section of this chapter briefly clarified the approximate age group in focus for ELT at primary levels of schooling worldwide. Given the wide range of contexts where English is now a feature of the primary curriculum, it is also important to understand how each of these contexts differs, if we are to distinguish between the likely outcomes that might be anticipated. Firstly, at a global level, contexts range from extracurricular private language schools to public (state) school classrooms. Without doubt, across such a range of contexts, funding and resource issues vary considerably; hence, outcomes will similarly vary.

Pedagogical approaches to learning English at primary level also vary widely today. These may include contexts where English is the medium of instruction (EMI), whereby all (or most) subjects may be taught in English from either the very beginning of schooling or perhaps introduced from the age of 9 or 10 years. In essence, this pedagogical approach has quite similar aims to the immersion approaches of the former colonial contexts outlined above, albeit with very different histories of implementation. Immersion schooling in English can be found today in a number of private international school contexts worldwide, many of which tend to cater for a relatively global mobile elite. Moving along the continuum somewhat, bilingual or partially bilingual contexts at primary level have become more popular in recent years. This pedagogical approach introduces English fairly intensively within the broad primary curriculum, generally at a ratio close to 50:50 between English and the national language. In some contexts (particularly Europe), this is increasingly described as content and language integrated learning (CLIL, which I shall return to later in the chapter), although the intensity of provision at primary level may be quite limited, expanding towards the upper primary and secondary levels. On a global scale however, the most commonly found model of English provision is where English is regarded as
a subject, with anything from one to four lessons per week included in the primary curriculum. The varied pedagogical approaches summarised here have been established based on a mix of theory, empirical evidence and sociopolitical grounds. The emergence of these influences over the past fifty years are outlined in the following section.

An emergent rationale for an early start to foreign languages

Many of the initial arguments put forward for the advantages of an early start to foreign language (FL) learning were based on Lenneberg’s (1967) hypothesis that an optimal period for language acquisition existed somewhere between childhood and early adolescence, known as the critical period hypothesis (CPH). This claim, relating to children’s biological abilities in their native language (sometimes known as mother tongue or first language) was soon adopted as a rationale for introducing children to learning an additional language from a young age. Evidence in support of this hypothesis came mainly from two sources: first, from the naturalistic setting of bilingual homes; second, from immersion education in some parts of Canada, where children from English-speaking homes attended primary schools with French as the medium of instruction. Evidence of their success operated as a powerful signal for the potential gains of an early FL start (Lambert and Tucker, 1972). Much contradictory evidence about this hypothesis has since been recorded, however, both from naturalistic settings and from classrooms. Given the limitations of space, I refer the reader to Muñoz and Singleton’s (2011) review for a helpful overview of the evidence related to the CPH. Importantly, their critical review questions the assumption that attainment should be based on native-like performance and suggests that the focus on age as the crucial variable has resulted in a lack of attention paid to the many other linguistic and contextual variables at play (p. 2). In particular, they report that an increasing number of studies provide empirical evidence for the impact of variables reflecting both individual and contextual factors. They also refer to evidence from recent brain research indicating that the young child’s brain may function differently from older peoples’, and thus process language differently (p. 21). However, as they note, there is still quite limited knowledge of how the brain functions in relation to language learning in general and the question of the CPH in particular (p. 25).

This clearly indicates that insufficient evidence currently exists for claiming that in an ordinary school classroom, with anything from 20–70 pupils or more, an early start to ELT will make a significant difference to final achievement levels. Nonetheless, the CPH, together with classroom evidence and a number of empirical studies (for example, Mihaljević Djigunović and Vilke, 2000; Wang, 2002; Edelenbos et al., 2006; Enever, 2011), have proved sufficient for policy makers and parents to be convinced that ELT should be introduced from the very earliest phase of schooling. This socio-political rationale has been driven mainly by a concern for future economic security – both at individual levels for the next generation and at the national level of engagement in what can be loosely termed as the ‘global marketplace’. Parents have often been highly influential here, keen that their children will have the best advantage possible for future employment. An example from southern India illustrates this point well. In the state of Tamil Nadu, education authorities have recently supported the introduction of primary English in government schools in an effort to limit the trend for parents to send their children to fee-paying private schools which promote themselves as offering EMI (Enever, 2015). For politicians, there is often a perception that a policy for introducing English early will be perceived as ‘modernisation of the curriculum’, ensuring their popularity and success in the next round of elections.

In the following sections, I will review some of the current trends and raise many questions regarding the complexities of satisfactory provision.
Recent trends in primary ELT

Pedagogical trends

Experiential learning and activity-based approaches

Arguably, the most important trend in primary ELT has been the gradual change in classroom approaches to teaching and learning. Medgyes and Nikolov (2010: 268) note how the paradigm of communicative language teaching (CLT; see Thornbury, this volume) “has permeated the language teaching scene since the 1970s”. This paradigm shift was reflected in the development of primary foreign languages (FL) pedagogy in Europe from the 1980s onwards, supported by a range of Council of Europe initiatives to establish an earlier start to teaching FLs in the primary school (Doyé and Hurrell, 1997). During this period, a trend towards activity-focused classroom approaches also emerged in Europe for teaching primary ELT (note, however, that given the different history of EMI, traditions in former colonies tended not to follow this same trajectory). Such activities are exemplified by the ‘Washing Line’ game in Figure 25.1.

Underlying this approach were understandings related to the characteristics of young children that may help them in learning languages. Komorowska (1997: 58) summarises points referred to in many publications, including: curiosity and sense of enquiry; a sense of imitation; love of repetition for its own sake; a sense of fun; a lack of inhibition about speaking; willingness to make errors; a predisposition for kinaesthetic learning modes; and a sense of competitiveness. At the time, little systematic research underpinned claims that these characteristics were advantageous in learning foreign languages early; nonetheless, publications for teachers suggested that they enabled children to benefit from an early start to FL learning, providing an activity-based approach was used. This approach differed substantially from analytically-based approaches to FL learning commonly used with secondary school learners at the time.

In essence, activity-focused pedagogy is rooted in a usage-based theory of language learning (Tomasello, 2003), perceiving language learning as a sociocognitive phenomenon whereby learners build competence in the FL through frequent usage in authentic or simulated authentic activities. This theory is itself constructed on a Vygotskian understanding of language learning as taking place within a specific social context (Vygotsky, 1978). It is argued that in creating an appropriate social context within the school environment, children will engage in effective learning. In primary ELT, this approach has brought the introduction of classroom activities such as songs and rhymes; drama and role play; listening to stories and sharing storybooks; language

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Washing Line game

1. Prepare two boxes containing identical clothing items.
2. Set up rope ‘washing line’ at front of class with two children holding the ends.
3. Organise class into two teams.
4. Call out one clothing item for first team member to find and hang on line, e.g. ‘Hang a red sock on the washing line.’
5. First team to select and hang correct item wins a point.
6. Team with most points wins when box is empty.

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Figure 25.1 The Washing Line game (vocabulary consolidation)

Source: Adapted from Halliwell, 1992: 48.
games; drawing and painting activities; simple cookery tasks; and science experiments (for an extensive list of activities, see Garton et al., 2011:12). Frequently, activities are integrated within a framework that focuses on the four language skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing), together with the inclusion of a strong emphasis on learning key lexis (Mihaljević Djigunović and Lopriore, 2011: 46).

**Recognising variability**

A more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the characteristics of young children and the processes of early language learning is now developing, although the area is substantially under-researched in many contexts. For example, Mihaljević Djigunović and Medved Krajnović (2015) have contributed a valuable analysis of longitudinal data from two substantial studies conducted in Croatia. The collective analyses from their research team provide important understandings of the significant variability between individual learners in the “cognitive, linguistic and affective” areas of development over time (p. 217). With an emphasis on the ‘learner as an individual’, they demonstrate the “complex, dynamic and idiosyncratic linguistic process” of language learning, shedding new light on the many factors that may define individual progress (ibid.: 217).

Given the extensive growth of early ELT in many contexts worldwide today, much further research of this kind is needed. A critical examination of the principles discussed above also suggests that, from a global perspective, many modifications may be necessary to adapt key principles to contexts where schooling is viewed as a substantially more formal endeavour, whereby enjoyment and motivation have not traditionally been prioritised as essential pre-requisites to effective learning. Indeed, Hu and McKay (2012: 356) claim that the introduction of a focus on oral communication has “raised significant issues concerning contextual and cultural influences/ constraints on pedagogical practices”.

**Models of increased intensity: bilingualism/CLIL**

Recent studies of primary English provision have indicated a typical pattern of one to four lessons per week in many primary schools (Enever, 2011; Hu and McKay, 2012; OECD, 2011). In some contexts, schools, municipalities or central governments have chosen to provide a more intensive model, thus increasing the weekly proportion of English lessons at primary level. This has mainly occurred in contexts where it may be compulsory or optional to study some or all curriculum subjects through the medium of English (EMI) during the secondary school phase.

One trend reflecting interest in the provision of a more intensive start for primary ELT has been the expansion of a model where some parts of a subject are taught in the FL (in this case, English). At primary level, this cross-curricular approach has been evident for many years. For example, the teacher might begin by sharing a picture storybook such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969), then build on this storyline to create a cross-curricular topic about life cycles. Such a topic is likely to draw strongly on the discipline of biology and may also include other aspects of science, maths and art, with the thread of English language running throughout. While this age-appropriate way of combining subject areas and including a strong language focus is ideally suited for integrating within a model of primary ELT comprising 1–4 lessons per week, a more intensive model of provision might allow for delivering substantial areas of the curriculum in English, assuming the availability of highly skilled teachers. In some parts of Europe this approach has spread, particularly at secondary school level, with provision
In primary schools now increasing (for example, in parts of Spain and Italy). In some contexts, this model (together with the model previously known as cross-curricular) has become known as content and language integrated learning (CLIL), intended to convey the meaning that the language curriculum area is combined with another curriculum area, so both are learnt at the same time. However, the most recent data reporting on the primary school context available in Europe (Eurydice Network, 2012: 39) records that “CLIL exists in some form in a number of countries but is not widespread across education systems” (for a more detailed overview of CLIL, see Morton, this volume).

The delivery model of CLIL shares much in common with models of bilingual or dual-language schooling, initially developed in North America and parts of Europe (Murphy, 2014; see Carroll and Combs, this volume). Drawing on evidence of the effectiveness of immersion schooling (Lambert and Tucker, 1972), interest in bilingual primary schools offering a combination of the national language plus English has grown substantially since the 1990s. This trend is further influenced by parental perceptions of the added advantage of English for their children’s future economic prosperity (as noted earlier).

Bilingual provision continues to increase, with a variety of models now in Latin America, where private schooling catering for the wealthier middle class has promoted it (Banfi and Day, 2004). This Latin American trend is also spreading to state schools in some urban areas. Similarly, across urban regions of the world (e.g. Vienna, London, Shanghai), bilingual primary schools have been established within the state school system, albeit on a small scale. Most notably perhaps, the development of two large-scale government-supported initiatives in Spain are of interest here. In one instance, the Spanish government, working in partnership with the British Council, has supported the development of 43 bilingual state primary schools across Spain since their inception in 1996 (Dobson et al., 2010). Following a similar pattern, the regional government of Madrid has established 303 bilingual state primary schools (Rico, 2013). In both contexts, the approach has been to introduce English incrementally across some subject areas, with other subjects maintaining delivery in Spanish. This modified form of additive bilingualism – where the FL is viewed as an addition to the first language – aims to equip learners to function effectively in both languages by the end of compulsory schooling. The overall achievements of both programmes are significant, although sustaining the quality of bilingual teacher expertise is proving problematic in some instances (Dobson et al., 2010: 143).

**Digital technologies**

While digital technologies are widely claimed to offer much potential in ELT (for further discussion, see Gruba, Hinkelman and Cárdenas-Clarios, this volume), their availability in many low economy contexts is currently very limited, particularly in primary schools. Only one or two large-scale studies have so far been conducted in primary schools that offer initial evidence of some possible contributions towards enhanced learning opportunities for this age group. In this section, four examples are briefly discussed.

**Interactive whiteboards**

At the level of national policy, ministries in some contexts have equipped classrooms with projection facilities and/or interactive whiteboards (IWBs). Such facilities offer the possibility of screening teaching materials, accessing Internet information/materials for the class and setting up links to school classrooms in other parts of the world (Phillips, 2010). The screen-based trend has been particularly widespread in China. For example, Wu (2012: 10) reports that in a survey...
of 1,099 teachers across six Chinese provinces conducted between 2007–2009, 82 per cent of schools were equipped with multimedia facilities, with 57 per cent of primary teachers using them during English lessons. Hockly (2013: 357) questions the rationale for the investment in IWBs, arguing that there is little evidence to indicate that they actually contribute to enhanced learning opportunities. She proposes that greater attention should instead be paid to other forms of mobile and hand-held devices.

**Remote teaching**

Banegas (2013) reported on an innovative national initiative in Uruguay, which equipped all primary school teachers and children with cheap laptops in an effort to overcome the digital divide that learners from low-income communities may experience (Warschauer, 2003). The introduction of a blended learning environment for primary ELT, using remote learning in which the teacher is in a different location to the learners but teaches via screen technology, is still at an experimental stage; however, the large-scale nature of this project offers an opportunity to explore new ways of employing digital technologies to meet the needs of primary ELT classrooms when insufficient local teacher expertise is currently available. If successful, it could provide a useful model for adaptation to other contexts.

**Gaming practices**

Butler et al. (2014) reported on the use of online games in English with children aged 4–12 years in Japan. Data from 3,945 children examined the young learners’ game-playing behaviours and their relationship to learning outcomes. The focus on the use of educational games online is of particular interest, given the enormous growth of the gaming market in recent years. However, their research findings indicated that not all of the more popular games actually contributed to children’s learning, “at least as measured by the test scores” (p. 271).

**Learning online in and out of school**

Butler et al. (2014) comment further on the increasing overlap of learning between home and school precipitated by the digital age. Internet use (via various mobile technologies) has become a daily activity in middle-income homes globally. Internet usage websites report that over 40 per cent of the world’s population now has Internet access (an increase from less than 1 per cent in 1995) (Internet Live Stats, 2015). In a further study, Lindgren and Muñoz (2013) report on the extent to which children are now accessing the Internet in English for a variety of purposes, including chatting with children in other countries for fun, visiting web pages to find information and watching programmes online with no subtitles. Their analysis (n=1,400) indicated a wide degree of difference both within countries and across the seven countries studied (Croatia, England, Italy, Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden). Significantly, most evidence of interactions in English was reported by boys aged 10–11 years old engaging in the online game of ‘World of Warcraft’. Further research on the significance of the age factor in the use of gaming for social purposes might be a valuable line of future enquiry.

Although a wealth of small-scale classroom studies are now beginning to emerge in the field of primary ELT (e.g. Pim, 2013), substantially more research is now needed throughout the primary sector if we are to fully understand how to effectively integrate digital technologies within the language learning environment to achieve enhanced learning, both in English and in children’s competency in learning through technology.
Pre-school / kindergarten ELT

Whilst the focus of this chapter relates to ELT trends in compulsory education, the growth of provision within pre-school and kindergarten contexts deserves a brief mention here, acknowledging its now substantial presence in some country contexts. Collecting reliable data globally on the scale of this development is simply an impossible task, given the range of contexts, the lack of national statistics and the difficulty in ascertaining the validity of any evidence provided. Two recent publications are reported here, together with one national survey, which provide indicative evidence of the growth pattern that has occurred since approximately the start of the twenty-first century.

Within Europe, a policy handbook has been compiled by European ministry officials and high-ranked academics in the field of early language learning, offering guidelines and recommendations on quality, effectiveness and sustainability in pre-primary provision (European Commission, 2011). The handbook records evidence of provision, much of which is driven at the local level by parents “who realise that with increasing globalisation the acquisition of languages other than their first language/mother tongue opens their children’s minds and is an asset for their future social and working life” (European Commission, 2011: 9). Significantly, the European Commission (EC) has strongly promoted diversity in language learning for many years. Despite the many guidelines, projects and reports to this effect, however, increasingly, the first choice of schools and pre-schools is to include English in the curriculum. While the report includes no data on which languages are available at pre-school level in Europe, it does refer to a quite limited choice, as a result of parental preferences and challenges linked to locally available teachers and to what it describes as “utilitarian considerations” (European Commission, 2011: 10). This may imply a preference for English in many contexts (reflecting evidence at primary levels in Europe), but the relevant wording of the report is unclear.

Further evidence of the spread of English at pre-school level is recorded in a survey conducted by Rixon (2013). The survey reported a range of evidence on primary and pre-primary English in 64 countries and regions worldwide. To date, this is the largest scale study conducted under conditions of systematic sample selection. With reference to pre-primary, Rixon reports that “in a substantial number of contexts English teaching is widespread in state Early Years education” (Rixon, 2013: 12). She notes that over half the respondents from state funded pre-schools report that “English is not a compulsory part of the state Early Years curriculum but is frequently taught at this stage” (Rixon, 2013: 12). Survey respondents from private pre-schools also recorded English provision in 34 per cent of contexts. Parental demand was often cited as influential, with evidence of parents paying for lessons in a number of contexts.

Findings from these two studies are also reflected in evidence from smaller scale studies of individual countries (Lee, 2009: 99; Mourão, 2012). In the following section, I will consider the nature of challenges to be overcome as a result of this trend towards an earlier start to ELT, both at the primary and pre-primary stages of education.

Challenges for primary ELT

It can no longer be claimed that there is little research in the field of primary ELT. However, while the wealth of linguistic, socio-cultural and education-focused research worldwide is now strongly developing in the field of primary ELT, there remain a number of areas still hardly explored by empirical research. One significant area where greater understanding is needed concerns the different classroom models of provision (e.g. frequency and intensity). Linked to this, a deeper understanding of how specific contextual factors may be modified to ensure maximum
benefit from the early start would be valuable. In this section, I will take some cautious steps towards highlighting those areas most urgently needing attention.

**Teacher expertise**

With the rapid expansion of primary ELT, the demand for well-qualified primary teachers with English competency has proved challenging to meet in many contexts globally. A further contributory factor has been the limited availability of appropriate teacher preparation courses, either at pre- or in-service levels. As a result, many teachers are expected to introduce those important first steps in English despite themselves having fluency levels which are not much above beginner levels (Hoque, 2009; Nikolov, 2009; Hu and McKay, 2012; Matthew, 2012; Wu, 2012; Rixon, 2013).

Debate on the most appropriate teacher model for the provision of primary ELT has continued to affect provision, with no clear evidence on whether a specialist English language teacher or generalist primary teacher with expertise in English is more likely to be effective. For example, whilst there is a broad recommended preference for a generalist model in Europe, many contexts continue to employ a specialist English teacher who may or may not have the skills to implement an age-appropriate methodological approach to the introduction of primary English (Enever, 2011: 26). Butler (2015) reports on heated discussion of this issue in both Korea and Japan. In her survey, Rixon identifies the predominance of specialist English teachers in primary classrooms, finding a generalist (class) teacher as the sole or main teacher of English in only 10 per cent of the contexts surveyed (Rixon, 2013: 20). Much of this lack of provision may relate to inadequate or inappropriate initial teacher preparation and to the very limited provision of in-service training available in many contexts. For example, Wu (2012) reports on situations in China where primary English teachers may only have a qualification in a different subject area, suggesting that this is particularly acute in rural areas (p. 17). Much further development is needed in many contexts before supply is able to meet demand. As an approximate illustration of the size of the shortfall, Rixon (2013: 18) reports that, in 64 per cent of the contexts covered by her survey, “there was a problem either over the whole territory or in parts of it concerning primary English teacher supply.”

Linked to the question of teacher expertise, patterns of provision continue to present challenges in many contexts. Understandings about what may be achieved with quite limited intensity of provision (2–3 lessons per week) are often confused, and much work is still needed in developing curricula that meet with the frequency and intensity model that is to be implemented. The following section reviews the challenges of achieving this.

**Curriculum design and intensity of provision**

The rapid introduction of primary English has necessitated an equally rapid response from curriculum and materials developers in terms of new materials and curriculum guidelines designed to support teachers of younger children, together with revised materials to provide appropriate continuity for teachers of older children. In a number of contexts, this challenge has not yet been fully met. In some cases, the course materials previously used with beginners aged 10, for example, are simply being re-used with beginners aged 8, with little or no adjustment made for the differing cognitive abilities and interests of this younger age group. In other cases, countries have attempted to phase in an increasingly earlier start over time, with a staged lowering of the start age every two or three years. For example, in South Korea, such developments resulted in revision of teaching materials for each age group every two years in order to keep up with each
new stage of the phasing-in process (Chang, 2007; Hu and McKay, 2012). This has proved to be an extremely demanding task, both for curriculum developers and for teachers adjusting to each new set of materials.

Altogether, the challenge of introducing an earlier start to FL learning appears to be quite unique in terms of curriculum design. Whilst most school subjects have a curriculum planning mechanism that starts with an introductory phase from the first school year right through to the end of schooling (for example, in the case of mathematics and literacy development), the recent lowering of the start age for the subject area of English has necessitated a complete revision of curricula from start to finish. Indeed, Johnstone (2009: 36) describes the introduction of early FL learning as “possibly the world’s biggest policy development in education”. Given the scale of this policy change, it is unsurprising perhaps that full curricular change has not yet been implemented in a number of contexts, resulting in a situation where little or no continuity or cohesion of the learning programme currently exists between phases of schooling (see Yoshida, 2012 for a discussion of this phenomenon in Japan). This challenge is discussed further in the next section.

A further challenge highlighted by Johnstone (2009) is the connection between the model of delivery (including frequency and duration of weekly lessons) and anticipated outcomes at each stage of schooling. Very little research has been attempted to compare models, and much clearer information on this is needed if we are to fully understand what can realistically be achieved under a particular set of circumstances.

**Continuity of provision in transition**

Somewhat surprisingly, the decision to introduce primary ELT often fails to include planning for the careful management of continuity between classes and from phase to phase in the schooling system. As indicated above, where there are no clear curriculum guidelines and no required course materials, there may be a tendency for teachers to include a range of learning activities which simply repeat what has already been covered, resulting in boredom and eventual lack of motivation for the learner. In those contexts where each phase of schooling is provided in a separate building or institution, curriculum cohesion across phases may be challenging to achieve. For example, teachers and school principals in the large-scale ELLiE study (Enever, 2011) reported limited or no contact with the next phase of schooling in situations where schools were placed some distance apart. Evidence from China (Wu, 2012: 18) similarly indicates a lack of communication across school phases regarding achievement levels, or even whether or not English classes have been provided at primary level. On a slightly different note, Yoshida (2012: 30) reports that the decision to introduce English in Japan from the final year of primary school in 2011 has revealed a disconnect between the methodology of primary and junior high schools.

Whilst finding a workable solution in specific learning contexts may prove to be an incremental process, evidence from an Australian project (Chesterton et al., 2004) suggests a possible way forward. The project comprised a cross-over programme of study in which teachers from upper primary met with lower secondary school teachers to develop a continuous cross-phase programme of work for learners moving from primary to secondary schooling. In this, they identified an outstanding model for establishing a coherent programme of FL learning. However, they acknowledged that achieving “initial and continuing cooperation, communication and support among partner schools” is crucial to the effectiveness and sustainability of the initiative (Chesterton et al., 2004: 56). This may prove a challenging remit in some circumstances, given its reliance on the expertise and commitment of teachers, together with the full support of the wider school community.
Conclusions

The scale of reform necessary for the introduction of primary ELT appears to have been underestimated in some contexts. A lengthy period of consolidation is now needed for equity of provision to be achieved in each national context. The quality of provision will finally depend on the political will to invest in a programme of teacher preparation to provide an adequate supply of well-trained primary English teachers equipped to refine and extend provision.

Parallel to the expansion and consolidation of primary English, we can now anticipate that pre-primary provision seems likely to expand considerably further. Over time, this may have the undesirable effect of increasing inequality, given the tendency for pre-primary provision to be funded privately by parents in many contexts worldwide. As a consequence, it is possible that the difficulties of varied competency levels currently experienced at the point of secondary school entry may simply move down a level to the primary school entry point over time. For ministries of education, this remains a complex problem to address.

Given the limitations of space, it has not been possible in this chapter to discuss the possible impact of trends in migration. Nonetheless, a brief note on this is appropriate here. As a general point, it appears that on current indications, migratory patterns are likely to increase due to a number of political and economic factors. Under such conditions, English may become increasingly important in primary schools, acting as a lingua franca, at least during the introductory period whilst the newly arrived children find their feet in the national/regional language. Within this scenario, English might adopt the role of transitional language, facilitating communication in and out of the classroom as children move between their home language and increasing competency in their new language context.

As a final note of caution in this conclusion, it is important to acknowledge the extreme changeability of language fashions. History has shown how quickly languages can fall out of favour, for any number of reasons. Despite the growth of primary ELT for over fifty years now, changed circumstances will bring new demands on languages and their speakers, taking them in unpredictable new directions. This degree of uncertainty adds to the challenge of planning for sustainability.

Discussion questions

• Do you consider that there are benefits of an early start to learning foreign languages generally, and English in particular? If so which are the most significant?
• Which model of early English learning would be most appropriate in your national schooling context? Identify the conditions that would need to be put in place to ensure sustainability.
• Grin (2003) claims that “The economic advantages may not outweigh the pedagogical advantages in all circumstances.” Discuss this viewpoint with reference to the introduction of primary ELT in a national context you are familiar with.

Related topics

Bilingual education in a multilingual world; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice; Content and language integrated learning; Secondary ELT; Sociocultural theory and the language classroom.
Janet Enever

Further reading


Cameron, L. (2010) Teaching languages to young learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (This book offers teachers an understanding of what happens in classrooms where children are being taught a foreign language.)

McKay, P. (2006) Assessing young language learners. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (This volume provides a comprehensive overview of why and how to assess young language learners, drawing on examples from around the world.)


References


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