

In October 2005, a conference entitled First Steps to Success was held in Lisbon. Jointly organised by APPI (Associação Portuguesa de Professores de Inglês) and the British Council, it was aimed at teachers who are involved in the new project of introducing English in state primary schools. Over 400 teachers attended this extremely successful event and the organisers hope to arrange a similar event next year. Jayne Moon was one of the plenary speakers at the conference.

In this summary of my talk I will:

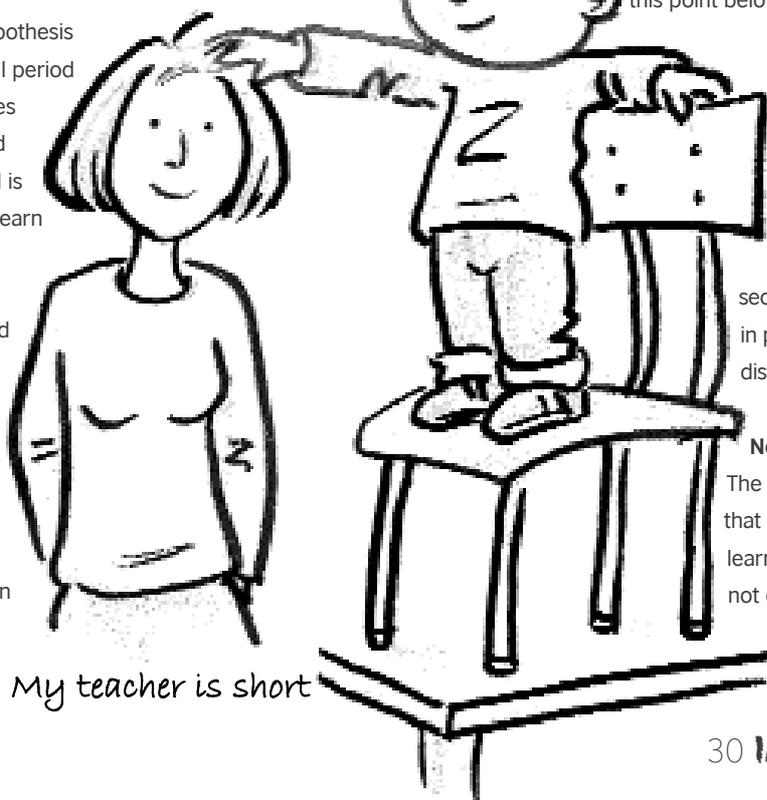
- discuss some of the main arguments used to justify an early start
- describe what makes children different or special to teach
- identify the important conditions to support effective teaching English to young learners (TEYL) programmes
- discuss the challenges and benefits of a TEYL programme.

An early start: is it a good idea for children to learn English at primary school?

The decision to begin English early is often based on enthusiasm rather than evidence that an early start does provide the expected benefits. Here are three of the main reasons that people give to justify an early start:

Younger is better

This refers to the hypothesis that there is a special period for learning languages during childhood and that after that period is over, it is difficult to learn a language. This is controversial, especially with regard to second language learning. There is also evidence that adolescents and adults are much quicker and more efficient learners than children, especially



My teacher is short

when it comes to learning grammar (McLaughlin 1992).

However, it is generally accepted that children have special sensitivity to pronunciation though they will not be able to make use of this particular instinct if their teachers lack fluency in the foreign language.

Younger is better in the long term

The second reason is based on the argument that 'longer is better': that by starting in primary school you increase the overall time for English and in the long term achieve a higher level of proficiency than those starting later. There is some evidence to support this position but it comes from second language situations where children are learning languages naturalistically. In foreign language school learning situations, exposure may not be sufficient for the benefits to really emerge.

English is an international language

The third reason refers to the global importance of English but this does not really concern children in primary school and does not necessarily mean that there is a need to start English early.

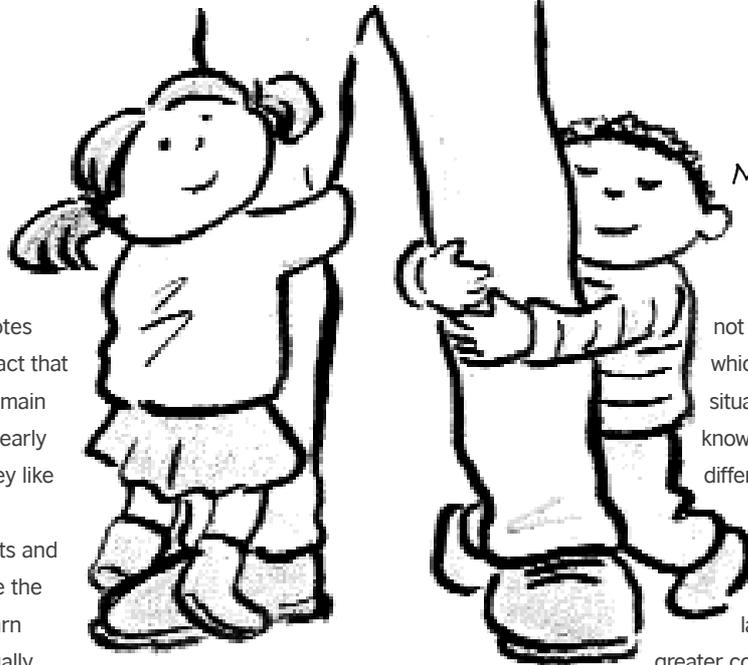
So none of the arguments really provide very strong support for an early start in foreign language learning situations. In the view of many YL specialists, an early start does not guarantee success (Singleton 2003) and it is the availability of suitable conditions rather than an early start which are the key to success in children's foreign language learning (Moon 2004, Nikolov 2000, Rixon 2000: 15). I will return to this point below.

What makes teaching children different from older learners?

If we are going to argue that teaching English to children requires specially trained teachers, then we need to justify this requirement. In this next section, I will highlight 4 characteristics, in particular, which mark children as being distinctive.

No reason for learning English

The younger the children, the less likely that they have any reason or need for learning the foreign language. They may not even understand what it means to learn a language or why they are



My teacher loves me

learning the language. The quotes by the drawings illustrate the fact that for many young children, their main reason for liking English in the early stages is based on whether they like the teacher or the learning activities (Nikolov 1999). Parents and local education authorities take the decision that a child should learn English. By contrast, adults usually have very clear instrumental reasons for learning a language e.g. to use the internet, for their job and so do most teenagers e.g. to pass an exam, to listen to pop music. So for the young learner teacher, the most important task will be to motivate and create interest in the new language so children are willing to try and use the new language.

Children's ability to self regulate

Because children are still developing, they are also still learning how to regulate and manage their behaviour and feelings. When children get angry or very excited, they often lose control of their behaviour. Children tend to lose interest in things they are doing in unpredictable ways and it is this unpredictability which make them different from teenagers and adults (Clark 1990). Children will quickly let the teacher know they are bored through their actions: they become restless, they distract other children, and so on. Adults may also feel bored or frustrated with aspects of their language learning class but because they have chosen to learn English, they will usually persist and hide their feelings. When engaged in pair or group work, older learners can co-operate and manage themselves because they understand that this mode may be helpful for language learning. Children will not understand why they are working in this way and will need careful supervision and training to do so effectively. So this characteristic of children has big implications for classroom management as teachers new to teaching children often find out to their cost!

Children give more attention to meaning rather than form

Children's natural instinct in any situation is to understand and make sense of it. If you observe children watching a foreign cartoon or film or observe them listening to a story in English, they are trying to work out what is going on, using physical or visual clues in the situation e.g. expression on people's faces, the place, people's gestures; they also use their knowledge of the world - what happened in a similar situation previously. They do

not pay attention to the words which are being used in the situation as their main concern is to know what is happening. This is very different from adults and teenagers who are generally more interested in the language itself, in the form of the language and can use their greater cognitive maturity to be analytical about the language. Children's instinct to go for meaning needs to be encouraged as it is very useful for language learning.

Learning through experience and activity

Children have a strong instinct from birth to explore their environment. We can see this in the way young children like to touch and play with things e.g. pressing buttons, switches. Some researchers suggest that this exploration through activity provides the basis for cognitive development. In language learning, this means that children are more likely to pick up language e.g. vocabulary, grammatical patterns, functions, from participating in activities which require their use than being taught them formally and deliberately. For example, if children follow instructions to make a mask and then use the mask to take part in a role play or drama, we can say that the activities they have been involved in support their understanding of the language used and, though they may not be consciously aware that they have been listening to language or using it in the role play, they may gradually start to acquire some of the language they are exposed to incidentally. In this respect, children are different from adults who can learn both analytically and also experientially. Most children tend to rely more heavily on experiential forms of learning up to around 9 or so.

Teaching children: a different experience

Teaching children is different because they are still developing cognitively, linguistically, physically and emotionally. So to teach English to children successfully, we need to take account of these and other characteristics in order to provide some of the conditions which will lead to successful outcomes. These are far more important than the age of starting. In my next section, I will consider some of the most important conditions.

Suitable conditions not age of starting

How much time and how often?

The overall amount of time given to foreign language learning

Special features

at primary levels and how often children receive lessons in a week are seen as critical factors in determining the rate at which children acquire the language and the levels of language proficiency which they will finally reach (Met and Rhodes 1990). In many state school systems around the world, children only receive between 60-80 hours of English a year, viewed by many as far too low for children to be able to gain anything linguistically, though it may be sufficient for attitude development and intercultural learning. This lack of exposure may help to explain why achieving high levels of proficiency can take a long time in a foreign language classroom and for many learners may not lead to a

successful outcome. The ACTFL Performance Guidelines (see Curtain 2000) for foreign language learning in the USA recommends 3- 5 classes a week, of no less than 30-40 minutes a lesson (between 90-200 minutes a week) throughout the year. Little and often seems to work best with children, perhaps due to the fact they do not yet have well developed memory techniques or learning strategies. Their

ability to concentrate is also limited which makes frequent sessions with plenty of revision very important (Nikolov & Curtain 2000 p 250.)

Realistic aims and expectations

Governments often lower the starting age for English or introduce English in the first grade, based on the optimistic desire to raise standards but aims of primary foreign language programmes can be hopelessly unrealistic, given the time allocated to early foreign language learning. Miraculous results cannot be expected from children exposed to the language for 1-2 hrs a week. Parents also have very unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved by children in a school learning context and expect children to become bilingual overnight. Children, as we saw earlier, are not particularly fast learners so it is important to realise that that they will not make huge

linguistic gains over 3 years with only 2 hours a week.

Hopefully, however, they will develop positive attitudes and an interest in English (Nikolov (2000) argues that attitudinal goals should be given priority at primary level) and will acquire a foundation in the new language which will give them a headstart at secondary school.

Competent EYL teachers

A TEYL programme needs teachers with:

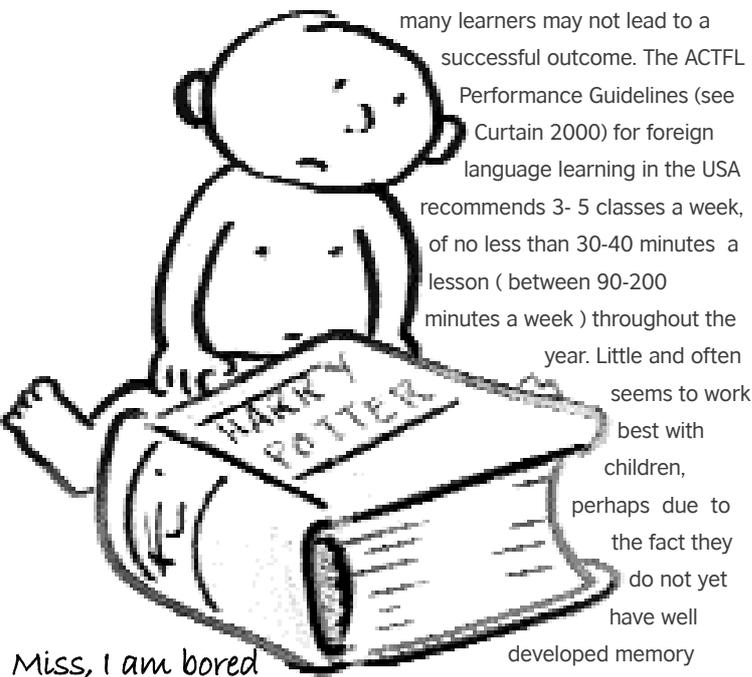
- Knowledge of and fluency in English (including good classroom communication skills) and knowledge of the culture
- YL foreign language pedagogy (knowledge of children's FL learning and appropriate teaching strategies for TEYL)
- Knowledge/understanding of children's overall development

Firstly, YL teachers need very good English language skills because they provide the main language input for children who may have limited exposure outside the classroom. They need good interaction skills in order to use the kind of activity-based and interactive methods which seem most suitable for young learners. They also need the flexibility to be able to adjust their language to the children's level, knowledge of English so they can provide feedback, and a rich knowledge of the culture so as to get children interested. Secondly, they need a knowledge of how children learn foreign languages and appropriate teaching strategies for teaching English so as to create interest in learning English. Thirdly, YL teachers need to have knowledge of children's cognitive, linguistic and emotional development as these impact on their FL learning.

It is often difficult to find this combination of professional knowledge and linguistic competence among trained primary teachers. Given the importance of the TEYL teacher in motivating children and providing input in a foreign language context, the provision of adequately qualified TEYL teachers is probably the most critical of all the conditions for Ministries to put in place in order to have a chance of successfully implementing a TEYL programme.

Age-appropriate methodology and curricula

Children's early phase of language learning can create positive attitudes and a lifelong interest in the language if it is done appropriately. So curriculum and materials need to provide learning experiences which are motivating, suited to their cognitive and linguistic levels and take account of their special



instincts and preferred ways of learning. Many agree that young learners need an experiential approach with some of the following characteristics:

- activity-based
- based on the here and now/use of concrete materials
- contextualised
- focused on communication (meaning) rather than form
- multi-sensory
- play and fun-oriented
- socially oriented
- content/topic-based or cross-curricular
- with a strong oral emphasis initially, especially with younger learners
- plenty of teacher support and scaffolding
- content chosen on the basis of children's cognitive level
- some age-appropriate language awareness/ 'noticing' activities

Appropriate assessment

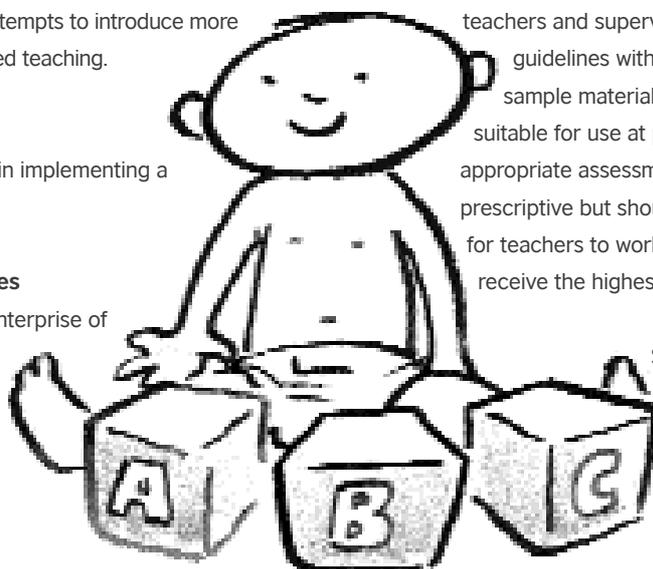
Our main concern in the primary classroom is to assist children's learning and assessment should support this aim rather than working against it. It needs to be developmental, using tasks familiar to children, and monitoring progress over time by collecting information about children's performance on classroom activities (many of which will be oral). This information will then help teachers to plan and adjust their teaching, according to children's needs. However, in all too many young learner classrooms worldwide, tests are the main form of assessment, often for bureaucratic reasons, even when there is no formal requirement to test children until the end of primary schools. This over-emphasis on testing at primary levels can have a strongly negative wash-back effect on what happens in the classroom and undermine attempts to introduce more experiential and activity based teaching.

Challenges

There are many challenges in implementing a new TEYL programme

Be realistic about outcomes

Sometimes when the new enterprise of introducing English at an early age begins, a huge amount of public optimism is generated. Public



expectations about the expected outcomes are often very high. However, it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved in the time allocated for English and to make sure that head teachers, parents and teachers are aware of this also. Unrealistic expectations can lead to later frustrations.

Plan long term

When a new programme like TEYL is launched, there are sometimes huge pressures for Ministries of Education to show what they are doing. A lot of energy and resources are often used up in public display while there is often pressure to produce some results immediately before the programme has really had time to run for a reasonable length of time. Such pressures need to be resisted as they lead to 'short termism' and distract everyone from the longer term goals. One of the most important areas of future planning is for teachers, the need to build up a cadre of well qualified YL teachers through the development of dedicated pre-service courses. This takes time and investment of resources

Calm and steady approach

One problem with public pressure is that it can lead to hasty decisions. Sometimes countries rush into large scale expansion of TEYL teaching at all grade levels. This can be disastrous if the curriculum and materials are not in place and there are insufficient qualified teachers. In some places, it has led to an understandable loss of enthusiasm among pupils and teachers. There is a need to pilot programmes and build up experience before rapid expansion.

Sufficient professional support for implementing TEYL

When countries first introduce a foreign language at primary school, there is a need for proper professional support from Ministries to guide the implementation, ensuring that schools, teachers and supervisors receive adequate curricular guidelines with clear aims and expected outcomes, sample materials, ideas on the type of methodology suitable for use at primary levels, and guidance on appropriate assessment techniques. These do not have to be prescriptive but should provide indicators of desirable practice for teachers to work with and help to ensure that all children receive the highest quality EYL teaching and assessment.

So there are many challenges ahead in introducing TEYL but also many benefits if the programme is successfully implemented.

Special features

Benefits for Children

1. Most importantly, if the experience is positive, it can create children's confidence in language learning and positive attitudes/motivation towards the language for the future and so help to sustain children's language learning through secondary school and beyond.
2. Language learning can help to widen children's cultural horizons and develop intercultural understanding.
3. It can make children more aware of language as a phenomenon in its own right (i.e. that language and the objects it refers to are independent of each other) which helps children to understand their own language better and aids the study of other languages.
4. Learning a foreign language requires the acquisition of new learning strategies. The exposure to 'foreignness', something new and different is a kind of cognitive conflict in Piaget's terms and can be the catalyst for cognitive development (Curtain 1990).

Conclusion

There are no educational or cognitive reasons why children cannot learn a foreign language: they are quite capable of doing so. However, there are many other important factors to consider when deciding whether to begin English early. Unless you have enough time, appropriate materials and curriculum, well trained and competent teachers, there is a high risk that very little is gained by starting younger and quite a lot lost in terms of resources, maybe frustrated teachers and young learners who get demotivated early and yet know they have to continue with English into secondary school.

So I am arguing for a planned approach, informed by research and experience, which ensures that the best possible conditions are provided so as to give the new TEYL programme every chance of success.

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