

ELT Research Papers 11–01

# Investigating Global Practices in Teaching English to Young Learners

Sue Garton, Fiona Copland, Anne Burns

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## About the authors

Dr Sue Garton is Senior Lecturer in TESOL and Director of Postgraduate Programmes in English at Aston University, UK. She taught English in Italy for many years, especially at undergraduate level. Her research interests are in language teacher education, classroom interaction and language teaching policy and practice. She has co-edited, with Keith Richards, a collection of papers about the discourses of TESOL entitled *Professional Encounters in TESOL: Discourses of Teachers in Teaching*. Her latest book, *From Knowledge to Experience in ELT* is co-authored with Julian Edge and is part of the Oxford Handbooks for Language Teachers series.

Dr Fiona Copland is Course Director for MSc TESOL Programmes by distance learning at Aston University, UK. She has extensive experience of language teaching and language teacher education in Nigeria, Hong Kong, Japan and the UK. Fiona has an MA in Applied Linguistics and a PhD in Education. Her research interests include teaching English to young learners and feedback talk.

Professor Anne Burns is Professor in Language Education and Director of the Centre for Language Education Research (CLERA) at Aston University, and Professor of TESOL at the University of New South Wales. She is an Honorary Professor at the University of Sydney. She is perhaps best known for her publications in action research (Burns, 1999, 2005, 2010) and teacher education (Burns and Richards, 2009). Her forthcoming publications include *Tips for Teaching Listening* (Burns and Richards. Pearson), *Teaching Speaking: A Holistic Approach* (Goh and Burns, CUP) and *The Cambridge Guide to Pedagogy and Practice* (Richards and Burns, CUP).

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# Abstract

This paper reports on the project *Investigating Global Practices in Teaching English to Young Learners*. Its main aims were to:

- discover what policy/syllabus documents inform TEYL practices around the world
- investigate and map the major pedagogies that teachers use
- better understand teachers' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, including the challenges they face
- identify how local solutions to pedagogical issues can be effective and how these may resonate globally.

The project was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data was collected through a survey that resulted in 4,696 responses from 144 countries, with responses emerging from all continents. Qualitative data was obtained through five observational classroom case studies of teaching practices in Colombia, Italy, Korea, Tanzania, and the UAE.

The study uncovered a wide range of factors concerning the teaching of English to young learners globally from the perspective of teachers involved in implementing these programmes. In particular, it showed that many of these factors are commonly experienced by teachers across different countries and contexts.

Five recommendations are made:

1. The pre-service and in-service training provided to teachers of young learners needs to be considerably strengthened.
2. Greater opportunities need to be found for sharing ideas and experiences amongst primary school teachers of English both nationally and internationally.
3. For a large number of teachers, there is substantial need for English language development.
4. An expanded range of materials for teaching young learners is needed.
5. Educational policy developers should be provided with advice, based on current research and good classroom practice, on effective curriculum development for young learners to enhance the learning experience of children.

# 1

## Introduction

English is being introduced to ever more and ever younger children and in many countries around the world English is now compulsory in primary education (Nikolov, 2009a; Pinter, 2006). However, curricula and practices are often being developed in an *ad hoc* way because there is little appropriate research to inform fundamental policy decisions. As Enever and Moon (2009:5) note:

*‘... we have yet to clarify the priorities for formulating effective language policies, for designing appropriate programmes of implementation and for meeting the very real challenge of ensuring that policy is effectively and sustainably implemented within the daily practice of classrooms.’*

Moreover, knowledge and understanding of teaching practices in the field of young learners is, at best, sketchy. There are a number of books that bring together worthwhile studies of small research projects, often led by local university researchers (see Moon and Nikolov, 2000; Nikolov, 2009a; Rixon, 1999) but these studies often focus on how young learners acquire particular systems, such as vocabulary (for example: Orosz, 2009) or skills, such as reading (for example: Samo, 2009). Other books recommend best practice in teaching young learners in the light of available research findings, informing and guiding both teaching and teacher education (for example: Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2006; Slattery and Willis, 2001). However, there are no studies, as far as we are aware, that examine how teachers around the world go about their everyday practice of teaching English to young learners, their attitudes to this teaching, and the challenges they face. Nor is there any research which provides a detailed description, on a case-by-case basis, of how expert teachers in local contexts ‘do’ English language teaching, where this teaching is not part of a programme of innovation and change (cf. Graddol, 2006).

The overall aim of this project was, therefore, to investigate global practices in Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) aged 7–11 from macro and micro perspectives. The chief aims were to:

- discover what policy/syllabus documents inform TEYL practices around the world
- investigate and map the major pedagogies that teachers use
- better understand teachers’ perceptions of their roles and responsibilities, including the challenges they face
- identify how local solutions to pedagogical issues can be effective and how these may resonate globally.

This report first reviews some of the existing literature on policy and practice in TEYL as this relates to the project. We then describe the research design and the data collected before summarising the major findings. Finally, we present our recommendations for future action to support teaching English to young learners.

# 2

## Review of the literature

The widespread introduction of English in primary schools has been described by Johnstone (2009:33) as ‘possibly the world’s biggest policy development in education’. Even in countries such as Poland, Hungary and Croatia, where a choice of foreign languages is offered at primary level, English is overwhelmingly the first choice (Enever and Moon, 2009; Nikolov, 2009b). There are a number of reasons for this trend:

1. The widespread assumption that earlier language learning is better (Y. Hu, 2007; Nunan, 2003).
2. The response to the ever-increasing demand for English as a result of economic globalisation (Enever and Moon, 2009; Gimenez, 2009; Hu, Y., 2007). Such a demand leads to pressure on governments from international economic forces to ensure there is an English-speaking workforce.
3. The pressure from parents in the national context who want their children to benefit socially and economically from learning English (Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004; Enever and Moon, 2009; Gimenez, 2009).

The growth in teaching English to young learners has not been universally endorsed, however. The assumed benefits of an early start are

controversial (see, for example, Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović, 2006; Pinter, 2006), especially in situations of minimal input, rather than language immersion (Larson-Hall, 2008). There has also been widespread criticism of policies that are generally imposed in a top-down manner and often without sufficient preparation (Enever and Moon, 2009; Gimenez, 2009; Y. Hu, 2007; Lee, 2009). As Gorsuch (2000) points out, national curriculum decisions and policies are essentially political and address curriculum content, but often fail to explain how such content should be implemented (see also Nunan, 2003). In other words, the pace of change has outrun the planning required to ensure the change is successful.

Previous studies have described the consequences and outcomes of the early introduction of English into primary schools, particularly in terms of the gap between policy and implementation (Ho, 2003; Martin and Abdullah, 2003; Pandian, 2003), both at macro- and micro-level. Some of the issues seem to be common across countries while others are more local. This review focuses on the policy and practice issues most closely linked to the aims of the current study (but see the chapters in Enever, Moon, and Raman, 2009; Ho and Wong, 2003a for details about individual countries).





## 2.1 Macro-level factors

The first point to note is that there is a great deal of variation in government policy from one country to another and even within the same country (see, for example, Brock-Utne and Holmarsdottir, 2004; Ho, 2003; Y. Hu, 2007; Kapur, 2009; Mihaljević Djigunović, 2009). Moreover, while in some countries, such as South Korea or Oman, the government maintains close central control over the implementation of policy (Al-Issa, 2007; Butler, 2009; Lee, 2009; Mitchell and Lee, 2003), in others, such as Brazil, few or no guidelines are offered (Gimenez, 2009). Such lack of clarity can cause considerable confusion, particularly at regional or school level. Until 2011, the Japanese government's policy, for example, aimed to introduce language activities with the purpose of fostering 'an introduction to foreign language and culture as part of international understanding, rather than teaching language learning per se' (Butler and Iino, 2005:40). This has resulted in schools and teachers having difficulties interpreting the policy (ibid.: 37). Y. Hu (2007) reports that in China the 2001 policy document refers to a staged and gradual introduction of English into primary schools but how this is to be achieved is not made clear. The result is educational inequality, especially between rural and urban schools and between coastal and inland areas (G. Hu, 2005a, 2005b; Y. Hu, 2007; Nunan, 2003).

Inequality of access to English at primary level, and especially the divide between urban and rural areas and amongst urban schools, has been highlighted by a number of other researchers (see, for example, Butler, 2009; Gimenez, 2009; Ho, 2003; Y. Hu, 2007; Nikolov, 2009b). The result in many countries has been a huge increase in the private sector, which in turn increases the gap between rich and poor, as wealthier parents are able to send their children to private school or for private English lessons (Enever and Moon, 2009; Hoque, 2009; Lee, 2009). This development creates both negative and positive consequences, causing, on the one hand, political, social, financial, and familial tensions (Lee, 2009), and, on the other, pressure on governments to improve state provision for early language learning (Gimenez, 2009).

So far this brief discussion has focused on the macro-level and on some of the political and social consequences of introducing compulsory English at primary level. This discussion is important as it reveals the backdrop against which the primary school teachers in the current study are working. These policy decisions also have ramifications within the classroom, which are discussed below.

## 2.2 Micro-level factors

### 2.2.1 Approaches to language teaching

Perhaps the biggest and most complex of the policy decisions impacting on the classroom concerns the approaches recommended for teaching English to young learners. In response to the perceived global demand for communication in English, new TEYL curricula have generally emphasised communicative competence. In many countries, particularly in East Asia (Ho, 2003), this has led to the introduction of some form of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT). This is the case, for example, in Korea (Li, 1998; Mitchell and Lee, 2003), Hong Kong (Carless, 2003, 2004), China (G. Hu, 2002), Turkey (Kirkgöz, 2009), and Thailand (Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2008), to name just a few.

Enever and Moon (2009) point out that CLT is a method that has its origins in EFL teaching for adults in western countries where groups are small and classrooms well-equipped. It may not, therefore, be appropriate for teaching children in over-crowded classrooms with few resources and very different educational traditions (G. Hu, 2002, 2005b; McKay, 2003). Moreover, the method is very often misunderstood by teachers, who may have received little or no training in its theoretical underpinnings and practical applications (Butler, 2005; Littlewood, 2007; McKay, 2003). Ho and Wong (2003b: xxxv) point out that CLT means different things to different teachers. The teachers in Li's (1998) study, for example, thought that CLT meant focusing solely on fluency and ignoring accuracy. Also, a lack of systematic preparation leads to uncertainty and confusion about its implementation (Butler, 2005, 2009; Li, 1998). Similar problems arise in the implementation of the more recent TBLT approach (Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2007). CLT and TBLT are often seen as simply incompatible with local ways of learning, or what Jin and Cortazzi (2006) call 'cultures of learning' (see, for example, Baker, 2008; G. Hu, 2002, 2005b; Littlewood, 2007; Martin and Abdullah, 2003). In particular, their learner-centredness is seen as inappropriate in some educational cultures (G. Hu, 2002; Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2008).

The consequence of all these factors is often a gap between pedagogic policy and classroom practice (G. Hu, 2005a, 2005b; Nikolov, 2009b; Nunan, 2003). The typical pragmatic response from teachers is the adoption of weak forms of CLT or TBLT (Carless, 2003; Ho and Wong, 2003b), whereby teachers interpret the approaches according to their local context (Mitchell and Lee, 2003), using, for example, communicative activities to practise discrete language items (Carless, 2004; Mitchell and Lee, 2003; Xinmin and Adamson, 2003). Indeed, both Li (1998) and Littlewood (2007) conclude that the advice to teachers should be to adapt rather than adopt, and G. Hu (2005b:655) calls for 'an informed pedagogical eclecticism'.

However, CLT is by no means universal in YL teaching, nor is it seen as universally problematic. For example, McKay (2003) points out that in Chile recent government policy appears to be moving away from CLT in recognition of its inappropriateness to the Chilean context, while Al-Issa (2007) notes that the Omani curriculum and teaching methodology are not based on communicative practices. Kubanek-German (1998:194), in her review of primary foreign language teaching in Europe, claimed that '[t]he subject of the appropriate teaching methods is the least controversial one'.

### 2.2.2 Recruitment and training

Many countries introduced English as a compulsory subject at primary school apparently without careful consideration of who was going to teach it. Some countries therefore found – and still find – themselves with a severe shortage of trained primary school teachers of English (G. Hu, 2005a; Y. Hu, 2007; Kirkgöz, 2009; Nunan, 2003; Nur, 2003), and this situation is especially acute in poorer or rural areas.

Solutions to this problem have varied both from country to country and from school to school. In China, for example, the government recommendation was that:

1. Primary school teachers of other subjects who had some English background should be trained to teach English.
2. English teachers should teach across a number of schools.
3. Retired English teachers from both primary and secondary schools should be employed.
4. Class advisors or teachers of other subjects should be used to organise students for activities such as watching English videos or listening to cassettes (Y. Hu, 2007).

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the first option has also been widely adopted in many parts of the world, although not always with a training component. Other countries 'imported' native-speaker teachers to try to fill some of the gaps (Nunan, 2003). The overall result, however, is a lack of fully qualified teachers (i.e. qualified to teach in primary schools and to teach English).

Many countries did provide some initial training when their policies were introduced. In Korea, for example, teachers were offered 120 to 240 hours to improve their language and teaching skills (Shim and Baik, 2003), while in Italy, as part of the *Progetto Lingue 2000*<sup>1</sup>, teachers could undertake either 300 or 500 hours of training in both language and methodology.

While pre-service and in-service provision has increased in many countries since the introduction of primary level English (see, for example, G. Hu, 2005a), lack of appropriate training is still seen as problematic by many teachers (Nunan, 2003; Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2008). Its importance is evident in the present study too.

### 2.2.3 Teachers' level of English proficiency

The problem of teachers' low proficiency level in English or their lack of confidence in their English ability is almost universally identified in the literature (see, for example, Baker, 2008; Butler, 2004; Ghatage, 2009; Hoque, 2009; Kuchah, 2009; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007; Nunan, 2003; Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2008). The perceived demands of CLT, such as teaching in the target language, lead to teachers' lacking confidence in their English ability, particularly in their speaking and listening skills (Kuchah, 2009).

However, the question arises as to what level of proficiency and fluency teachers really need in order to teach in primary schools. It may be that the real issue is not the teachers' lack of proficiency, which may well be more than adequate for TEYL, but rather a lack of confidence predicated on the belief that native-like competence is required to teach CLT successfully.

One interesting development has been the promotion in some countries, such as Korea, China and Taiwan, of technological support and multimedia packages, in the belief that these can go some way towards compensating for the lack of qualified teachers or their low language proficiency. A number of writers have argued that such resources, used appropriately, can offer much support to teachers (Y. Hu, 2007; Mitchell and Lee, 2003; Nunan, 2003), although there is the issue of unequal access to technology, even within the same country (G. Hu, 2005b).

<sup>1</sup> Circolare Ministeriale 6 agosto 1999, n. 197 [http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/circolari/cm197\\_99.html](http://www.edscuola.it/archivio/norme/circolari/cm197_99.html)

### 2.2.4 The classroom context

There are a number of classroom-based factors that may militate against teachers following national policy. Large classes are common in many parts of the world (Ho, 2003; Wedgwood, 2007) and teachers believe this makes it difficult or impossible to introduce more learner-centred teaching because, for example, they cannot closely monitor students' language use (Li, 1998) or use pair work and group work (Hoque, 2009).

Problems of control and discipline connected with learner-centred teaching in large classes have also been raised (Butler, 2005; Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2007). Butler (2005) refers to what she calls 'classroom harmonization', which some teachers see as particularly challenging during English classes because of the way they are expected to teach. Carless (2004) notes that there is a tension between the need to fulfil local expectations for quiet and orderly classrooms and the need to carry out oral English tasks, possibly in large classes. He concludes that teachers need to learn to be tolerant of what he calls 'constructive noise', while ensuring their pupils are on-task (ibid).

Another factor is the number of hours per week dedicated to English. According to Ho's (2003) overview of 15 countries in East Asia, the hours in primary schools varied, from between one and two hours in South Korea to between four and six hours in Malaysia or Singapore. Teachers with a low number of hours per week believe they cannot introduce learner-centred teaching and also cover the syllabus (Carless, 2003, 2004; McKay, 2003).

### 2.2.5 Examinations and assessment

Although government policies and curricula typically advocate teaching communicatively, this approach is often incompatible with the demands of national examinations (Carless, 2003; Li, 1998; Littlewood, 2007) which continue to be grammar-based. This situation can lead to the backwash effect as teachers are under pressure to complete the syllabus and prepare for examinations (Carless, 2003; Pandian, 2003). Although the backwash effect would appear to be more severe at secondary level (Gorsuch, 2000; G. Hu, 2005b), it certainly exists at primary level too (Carless, 2003; Hoque, 2009; İnal, 2009; Nunan, 2003; Pandian, 2003). For example, Pandian (2003) reports that a study in Malaysia revealed teachers were focusing on reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary, rather than on listening and speaking as these latter skills were not part of the Primary Schools Assessment test.

### 2.2.6 Materials and resources

The situation concerning both which materials are used to teach YLs and their availability varies greatly. In some countries there is one prescribed textbook for each grade, for example, in South Korea (Butler, 2004) and Malaysia (Pandian, 2003). In other countries, there is a range of government-approved textbooks for teachers to choose from, as, for example, in China (G. Hu, 2005a) and Singapore (Mee, 2003). In yet other countries, such as Italy, schools are free to choose their own textbooks from those available on the market (reported by the case study teacher) or to not use a textbook at all, as in Abu Dhabi (reported by the case study teacher).

In many countries, teachers have found themselves with a lack of suitable materials, either because materials are not available (Hoque, 2009; Y. Hu, 2007; Mathew and Pani, 2009) or because they do not reflect changes in the curriculum (Y. Hu, 2007; İnal, 2009; Nunan, 2003). Local textbook production has not necessarily been a satisfactory solution. As Hoque (2009) points out, in Bangladesh, for example, textbook writing committees are led by academics with little experience of teaching at primary level. The solution in China has been to use cooperation between local education departments and publishers and overseas publishers and textbooks writers (G. Hu, 2005a). Even where books do exist, they may not be available to the children (Mathew and Pani, 2009). Moreover, teachers may need training to use the new books, otherwise they continue to employ previous methods (Nur, 2003).

Where textbooks are inadequate, teachers often lack the time and expertise to develop appropriate materials (Li, 1998). Yet good materials may have an important role to play as they can become the 'de facto' curriculum. As Nur (2003:168) points out, where there is a lack of qualified teachers, 'textbooks appear to have a strong positive impact'.

The textbook is clearly not the only resource that may be lacking in primary schools. Ghatage (2009) notes that while policy in Maharashtra, India, encourages the use of audio-visual aids, such as TV and radio, these are unavailable in rural schools. The teachers in Li's (1998) study complained that there was insufficient funding for the equipment and facilities needed for learner-centred teaching, a point also made by İnal (2009).



### 2.2.7 Learners

Many teachers believe that they are limited in what they can do in the primary classroom because of learners' low levels of proficiency (Li, 1998). Moreover, learners' expectations about what to learn, such as the importance of grammar for examination purposes (Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2008), and how to learn English may conflict with what teachers are expected to do (Ho, 2003). However, Carless (2003) points out that sometimes mismatches in expectations may be more to do with the teachers' lack of understanding of CLT and their inability to select appropriate tasks than with any real incompatibility with the demands of tests or the expectations of students.

Another issue frequently reported is an apparent lack of motivation and interest in English on the part of learners, who may not see any need to learn the language or simply do not see mastery of it as attainable (Li, 1998). This may be particularly acute in rural areas where learners have little contact with foreigners and therefore little perceived need to learn to communicate in English (Ho, 2003). Consequently, teacher-fronted classes with a focus on grammar and memorisation are preferred (G. Hu, 2005b; Li, 1998; Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison, 2008).

### 2.3 Summary

This review has touched on some of the major issues surrounding policies and practices in TEYL. From the overview presented above, it is noticeable that, overall, the view tends to be rather pessimistic, with Nunan (2003:609) concluding that:

*'English language policies and practices have been implemented, often at significant cost to other aspects of the curriculum, without a clearly*

*articulated rationale and without a detailed consideration of the costs and benefits of such policies and practices on the countries in question. Furthermore, there is a widely articulated belief that, in public schools at least, these policies and practices are failing.'*

However, the more recent papers cited show a slightly more optimistic view and it may be that the situation is gradually improving, following initial difficulties. A number of the papers in Enever et al. (2009), for example, report on recent regional and national initiatives to enhance the teaching of English to young learners which have been relatively successful.

This review is by no means exhaustive. It has not, for example, discussed the possible negative effects of the dominance of English on local languages (see, for example, Bruthiaux, 2002; Kapur, 2009), nor have we considered the difficulties in transition from primary to secondary school caused by language policy (see, for example, Martin and Abdullah, 2003; Nikolov, 2009b; Qiang, 2009). Finally, we have not discussed English medium education (see, for example, Brock-Utne, 2010; G. Hu, 2005a, 2005b). The debate about English as the language of instruction in primary schools is likely to become more central at a time when not only countries with a colonial legacy of English (such as Malaysia) are struggling with their language policy, but countries traditionally considered EFL contexts (such as China) are contemplating the introduction of English-medium education. These issues have not been discussed, not because they are not important, but because they were not the focus of the research presented here. Nevertheless, they undoubtedly affect many of the teachers involved in the current study.



# 3

## Research design

The methodology used for the study falls principally within an interpretive-exploratory paradigm (see, for example, Grotjahn, 1987) with the major goal of gaining an insider – or emic – perspective (van Lier, 1988; Watson-Gegeo, 1988) on the key construct of global practices in TEYL. Furthermore, given current trends towards mixed-method research designs (see, for example, Creswell, 2003; Dörnyei, 2007), drawing on both quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled a more rounded picture of these practices to emerge as well as complementary findings to be presented. The mixed methods design adopted consisted of: i) a survey of perceptions of TEYL practices from a global sample of teachers of English; ii) detailed case studies of the contexts, practices and perceptions of five teachers in different continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, South America). Ethical approval was gained from Aston University before the survey was disseminated and the case studies were carried out, and informed consent was obtained from the schools and teachers involved in the studies.

The cross-sectional survey was provided both electronically through Survey Monkey, and via hard copy to accommodate limited or no technological access. This approach allowed for large and geographically diverse samples of data to be collected in an efficient, economic, and standardised manner (de Vaus, 2002; Dörnyei, 2009). Responses were facilitated through local offices of the British Council and the researchers' professional contacts and resulted in a very large database, numbering 4,696 responses from 144 countries. Twelve countries returned 100 responses or more: Italy (559), Brazil (293), Turkey (283), Palestine (240), Egypt (204), Colombia (183), Latvia (161), Lithuania (133), South Korea (125), Croatia (116), India (101) and Macedonia (101). A further 14 countries returned over 50 responses: Ukraine (99), Spain (98), Poland (86), China (80), Russia (77), Nigeria (70), the UAE (70), Georgia (68), Argentina (62), Taiwan (61), Tanzania (58), Bangladesh (56), Azerbaijan (53), and Jordan (53). In relation to the survey responses, which draw on non-probability 'opportunity' sampling, it should be recognised that they represent reported practices rather than provide conclusions about actual practices.

The survey items drew on the literature on survey design (see, for example, Dörnyei, 2009; Oppenheim, 1992) and were piloted with ten potential respondents in ten different geographical regions. There were six sections, which required information relating to: 1) demographics (location/type of school, qualifications/years of experience, English proficiency); 2) English teaching in the country; 3) the school; 4) the class and activities used; 5) syllabus planning; 6) teachers' opinions about challenges, improvement and change. A range of closed, ranked, and open-ended items was used in order to gain mainly quantitative but also some qualitative responses<sup>2</sup>.

The cross-sectional observational case studies were undertaken by the researchers with five teachers in different international locations: Africa (Tanzania), Asia (South Korea), Europe (Italy), the Middle East (the UAE), and South America (Colombia). The locations were selected to give as diverse a perspective as possible on teacher practices and approaches across the world. As the sample is opportunistic and purposive, it provides illustration rather than representation. A consistent methodology was used for all five cases.

1. Teachers were contacted either through local contacts or because they volunteered in the survey to be observed.
2. At the school site, teachers were asked in an initial interview for preliminary information about the class/students, the purpose and plans for the lesson, and for any other information relevant to the observation. Teachers also provided relevant documents (policy and syllabus documents and classroom materials).
3. Each observation was audio-recorded and field notes taken by the researcher.
4. Post-observation interviews were conducted. Transcripts were made of all the interviews.

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<sup>2</sup> A copy of the survey is available from the researchers on request.

Details of the case study contexts are as follows:

1. Colombia: one Grade 4 class was observed in a state school in a suburban location in a low socio-economic neighbourhood in the south of Bogotá. The teacher was male and in his late fifties.
2. Italy: one Grade 3 and two Grade 5 classes were observed in a state school in a medium-sized, relatively wealthy town in Northern Italy. The teacher was female and in her early fifties.
3. South Korea: a mixed Grades 1 and 2 after-school class was observed in a state school just outside the centre of Seoul. The teacher was female and in her late forties.
4. Tanzania: one Grade 1 and one Grade 4 class was observed in a rural state primary school about 8 kilometres from a medium-sized town in central Tanzania. The teacher was female and in her mid-to late fifties.
5. The UAE: two single sex (boys) Grade 6 classes were observed in a model state school in a rural location in Abu Dhabi. The teacher was male and in his mid-forties.

These cases provide a snapshot of current practices each obtained in one location on one teaching occasion. They illuminate and complement the quantitative data but cannot claim to be generalised interpretations of ongoing practices in the classrooms concerned or in the wider practices at national levels.



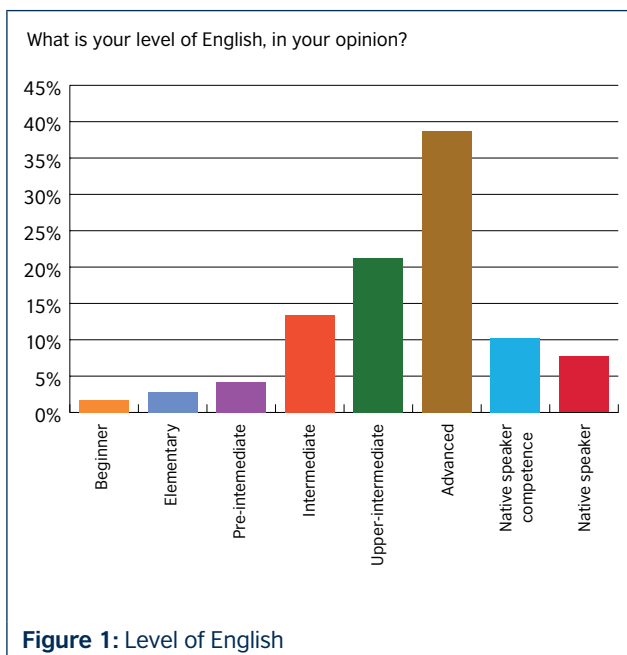
# 4

## Main findings

In this section, we first give a brief overview of the profile of the YL teachers who responded to the survey and then present a brief summary of findings in response to the aims of the research as listed in the introduction (see appendix for the complete set of data related to the points below).

### 4.1 Profile of a YL teacher

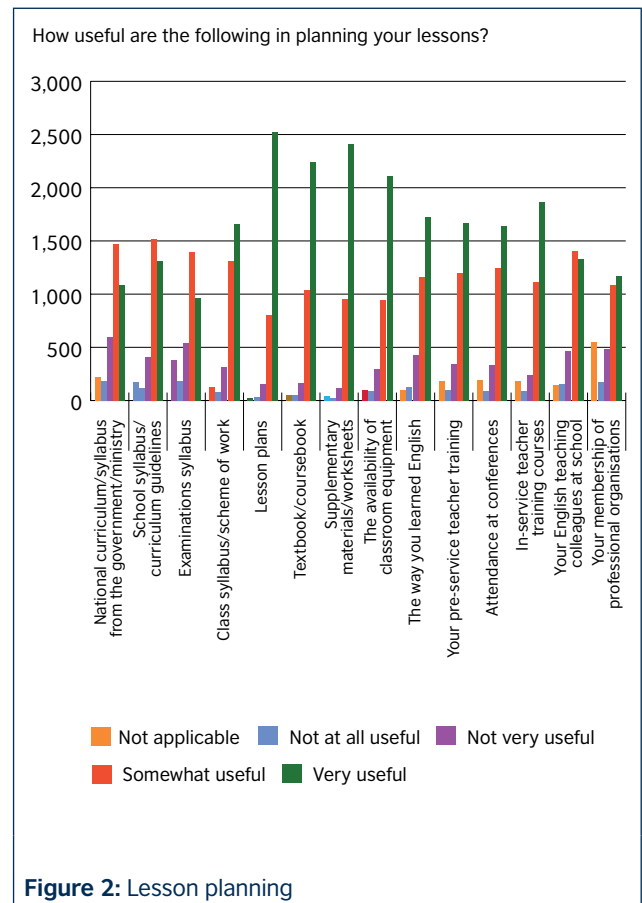
The vast majority of survey respondents were female (80.4 per cent). Most worked in state schools (68.3 per cent) in urban areas (73.9 per cent), and approximately a third were in their thirties while just over a quarter were in their twenties and a quarter in their forties (Appendix, Figures 1, 2, 7, 8). It is interesting to compare age with experience, as over half the teachers had been teaching English for less than ten years and over two-thirds had been teaching English to young learners for less than ten years (Appendix, Figures 4 and 5). This finding shows that many teachers in the survey did not start their teaching careers as teachers of English to young learners and is consistent with previous research. From the answers to the questions on nationality and on level of English (Figure 1, below), it can also be seen that around 92 per cent of the respondents do not speak English as their first language. Approximately 73 per cent are educated to university level (Appendix, Figure 3), while nearly 50 per cent report that their level of English is advanced or at native-speaker competence (Figure 1, below).



In comparison to previous studies into TEYL, the level of English reported seems particularly high and both results are probably a consequence of the type of teacher who would have access to, and be able to complete, the questionnaire. Finally, 66.6 per cent of respondents report receiving pre-service training, while 73.7 per cent report receiving in-service training.

### 4.2 Policy/syllabus documents

Primary school teachers of English around the world are influenced by a wide range of documents including government documents and local documents, such as the school's syllabus. The most influential document, however, was the lesson plan, with 94 per cent of respondents to the survey rating this as useful or very useful (see Figure 2 on the next page). The course book was also seen as extremely important, as were supplementary materials. While this finding might be predictable, what was surprising was the number of teachers who found national documents such as national curricula of value when planning; over 70 per cent rated these documents as useful or very useful.





All the case study teachers worked from a plan, which was detailed to a greater or lesser extent, and the researchers were shown a range of course books from which teachers worked. In the UAE, the researcher was also shown national documents and their value was discussed. Four of the five teachers seemed keen to implement government policy and used national curriculum documents to support this implementation, although in Korea the strict government guidelines were seen as rather constraining. Government policy seemed to be least constraining in Italy, where ministerial guidelines have traditionally been quite general and open. The most important level of planning from a teacher's point of view seemed to be at school level, with each school or group of schools preparing its own annual syllabus, based on ministerial guidelines but with some flexibility. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages was also mentioned by the case study teacher as influencing the syllabus.

### 4.3 Major pedagogies

According to the survey, teachers used a large number and wide variety of activities in their classes (see Table 1 below and Appendix, Figures 15 and 16). Perhaps surprisingly, of the list of activities provided in the survey, listening to the CD or tape-recorder was the most popular activity across all responses. A number of 'traditional' activities were also popular, including repeating after the teacher, children reading out loud, filling the gaps, grammar exercises, and children memorising words or phrases. However, 'creative' activities were also frequently used, particularly games and songs. Role play was also used by the majority but role-plays can be used both for communicative, meaning-focused activities and for more drill-like, accuracy-focused activities.

Children repeating after the teacher	74.4%
Listening to tape-recorder/CD	73.5%
Children reading out loud	70.3%
Playing games	69.9%
Songs	66.9%
Filling gaps/blanks in exercises	64.8%
Role-play	60.8%
Grammar exercises	56.4%
Children memorising words and phrases	56.2%
Handwriting exercises	52.3%

**Table 1:** Activities used every lesson or often by the majority of teachers

The popularity of listening to the CD or tape may be due to the fact that many teachers reported a lack of confidence in their own use of English and so may prefer to provide children with a native speaker model via a recording. This finding is borne out by previous research, as reported in section 2.2.3 above.

One very noticeable absentee from the list of frequently used activities is storytelling. Only 42 per cent of the teachers reported telling stories every lesson or often, while 17 per cent said they never or rarely read stories. This is surprising given their importance in the young learner literature, particularly in books which provide practical advice to teachers (Moon, 2000; Pinter, 2006; Slattery and Willis, 2001).

Interestingly, very few activities were unpopular, with only one activity – translation – being never or rarely used by the majority of teachers, again showing the wide range of activities that teachers report exploiting in class (see Table 2 below and Appendix, Figures 15 and 16). Other activities that at least 30 per cent of teachers reported using rarely or never were a mixture of traditional and creative: computer work, watching TV/videos, children reading silently, dictation, children telling stories, and creative writing. What is least surprising is the low report of children doing computer work. In many schools, computers remain a luxury and internet access is limited.

Translation exercises	50.5%
Activities on the computer	45%
Watching videos/TV	39.4%
Reading silently	37.3%
Dictation	36.8%
Children telling stories	33.5%
Creative writing	30.7%

**Table 2:** Activities used rarely or never by at least 30 per cent of the teachers

In the responses to the open question asking teachers to list other activities used, a major concern for teaching vocabulary was evident, particularly through games such as hangman, bingo, crosswords, card games, and board games. Flashcards are also a common tool. Performance and drama activities are used frequently, from children performing actions to songs or acting out short dialogues, through to end-of-term plays for parents. A number of teachers also reported using Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, drawing and colouring and competitions, especially competitive games. Other interesting and perhaps less predictable activities listed by a number of teachers include children carrying out surveys and interviews, giving presentations (from five-minute 'show and tell' activities to reports of research projects), art and craft work, dance, activities outside class (from picnics in the playground to sightseeing trips), and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) work. There were also a number of more traditional activities reported, especially reading and listening comprehension and writing sentences or paragraphs, and paraphrasing.

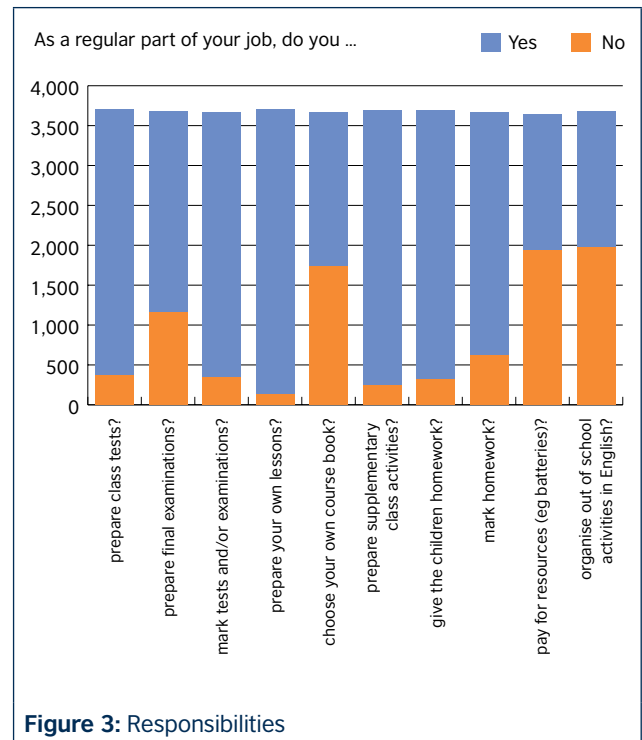


The 'other activities' listed above represent only a small selection of those reported by the teachers, demonstrating an extremely wide variety of activities, from the very simple and resource-free to the more complex and resource-intensive, many of which could potentially be used by primary school teachers everywhere.

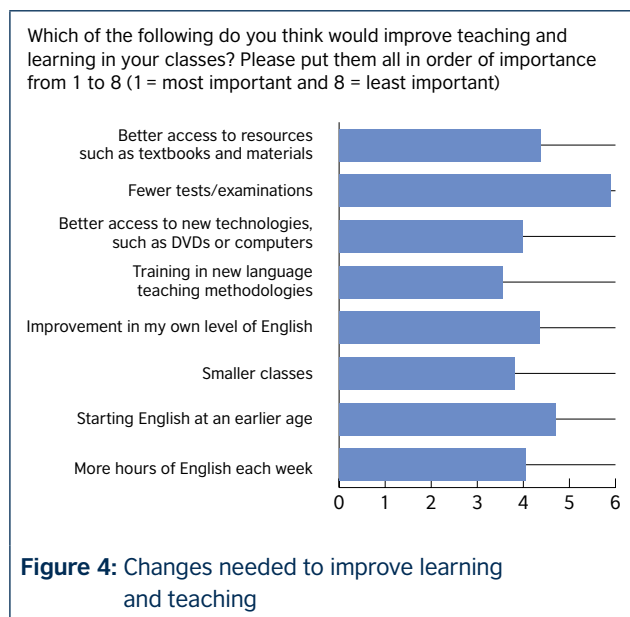
The lessons observed in the case studies bore out the findings from the survey, with evidence of teachers attempting to introduce communicative activities to fit the cultures and constraints of local contexts. For example, students in the UAE did a good deal of controlled speaking and writing, including repeating after the teacher and reading out loud. At the same time, the controlled work was delivered through an interactive game in which the pupils had to find matching sentences and pictures and pin them onto the board and through local examples, such as, 'How many camels do you own?' The teacher in Tanzania conducted presentation and controlled practice of grammar structures, but she made it relevant to the children by using realia, including clay pots, flowers, and footballs, and by using examples from the local culture such as 'Will you have ugali for lunch?' She also asked the children to personalise their responses with reference to their everyday lives, such as buying bananas at the market.

#### 4.4 Teachers' roles, responsibilities, and challenges

Survey responses indicate that teachers have to prepare lessons, tests, supplementary materials, and homework, and they must mark tests and homework (see Figure 3 below). 54 per cent can choose their own course book which means that, for a large minority, this important lesson planning document is imposed. More worryingly, approximately 1,700 teachers pay for their own resources; these can be anything from batteries to power CD players to microphones to project over noisy classes. Nearly half are responsible for organising out-of-school activities.



When asked about factors that would improve learning and teaching in their contexts, training in new language teaching methodologies was ranked as the most important, followed by smaller classes and better access to new technologies such as DVDs or computers (see Figure 4 below). These issues have all been identified by previous research as reported in sections 2.2.2, 2.2.4 and 2.2.6 above. However, fewer tests/examinations were ranked as the least important, followed by starting English at an earlier age. Surprisingly, given reports in previous research, improvements in the teacher’s level of English was also ranked as less important. It seems likely that this finding is a function of the questionnaire sample, whose level of English, as noted in 4.1 above, is probably higher than average.



Challenges identified by the teachers in the survey are many and varied, but, overwhelmingly, large class sizes and discipline issues were highlighted as problematic. Mixed level classes were also difficult, with teachers reporting that often they had to teach a class in which there were both complete beginners and students whose English was of a good standard. Many teachers also worried about working with children with learning difficulties and disabilities. Another much reported problem was how to motivate children who could see no immediate use for the language they were learning.

In terms of pedagogy, teachers stated that how to teach grammar was a great concern, in particular how to explain grammar rules to young learners and how to make grammar practice interesting for them. This finding is noteworthy and merits further research, as it is not clear from the literature what the benefits of explicit grammar teaching are to children of this age group.

Overall, our findings on this research question support much previous research, but our data also reveal challenges and issues that have not previously been identified, such as the prominence given to mixed-level classes and to children with learning difficulties or disabilities. These findings in particular deserve further attention by both researchers and teacher educators.

#### 4.5 Solutions to pedagogical issues

Solutions were mostly identified in the case study schools. For example, in the UAE, although class size was relatively small (15 students in one case), the children were very lively and found it hard to remain in their seats for any length of time. What is more, concentration spans were limited. The teacher addressed these discipline problems by introducing strategies to regulate behaviour, including raising a ‘stop’ sign when behaviour seemed out of control, and introducing a ‘sleep’ activity involving resting heads on hands to calm children down before the next stage in the lesson.

In the Colombian classroom, the teacher enlisted the help of the regular classroom teacher, who was present throughout, to go round the class and help monitor that the children were staying on task when they were asked to complete activities in their books.

The Italian and the Korean teachers both responded to issues of discipline, mixed levels and learning difficulties by organising the children in small groups (4–6), which were usually changed once a month, and by using a reward point system. Both teachers used different grouping strategies, sometimes selecting groups themselves or operating a random selection, and at other times asking the children to select their own groups. Where the teachers observed that the groups were not well-balanced, they sometimes intervened to make changes. The reward point system, which was also noted in the UAE, was used to encourage collective class responsibility and related to good behaviour, performance in English (such as completing homework and answering questions in class), and classroom management (such as finding material quickly).

The factors the Korean teacher identified in managing mixed-ability groups related to ensuring a gender-balance, and mixing children of different abilities. The Italian teacher also identified other challenges including children whose first language was not Italian as well as those with learning or behavioural problems, such as a child who did not seem to want to learn and did little in class. She placed emphasis on peer support and peer learning to meet these challenges.

Motivation was addressed in a number of the classes observed. Generally, activities were short and had a clear purpose. For example, the teacher in Colombia had planned a series of activities to consolidate grammar-based work mandated in the syllabus. He made great effort to enliven the teaching of grammatical items by introducing engaging communicative activities. In particular, he used music and songs, visuals, and word puzzles to appeal to the children and maintain their attention. He also recycled the activities at various points in the lesson and explained that he did this so that the children would not get bored. Often an element of play was introduced, as for example, in the UAE where a child was dressed in baseball cap and sunglasses and given a camera in order to play a tourist. In Italy, the teacher had a 'birthday hat' which a child wore on his/her birthday and where the other children offered imaginary presents while repeating a well-rehearsed dialogue. The Italian teacher also moved the children around, from sitting at desks, to a reading space where they sat on mats on the floor, to all standing at the front of the class, a practice also favoured by the teacher in Abu Dhabi.

In the lessons we observed, there was little overt teaching of grammar rules and so children were not demotivated by trying to attend to teaching which might be beyond their cognitive level. The one exception was Tanzania where the lesson was grammar-based. However, the children were particularly motivated and the teacher maintained their interest through constant elicitation and concept-checking, a lively pace and high energy. Indeed, in all the classes we observed, most children appeared very motivated and interested in learning English. Even though all the classes, with the exception of the UAE, took place in contexts where the children have little or no contact with English outside the classroom, there was no evidence of the motivational problems identified in previous studies related to the relevance of learning English. This may confirm Carless's (2003) summation cited above that pedagogical factors may be more to do with what is happening inside the class than with external factors.

# 5

## Recommendations

The study uncovered a wide range of factors concerning the teaching of English to young learners globally from the perspective of teachers involved in implementing these programmes. In particular, it shows that many of these factors are shared by teachers across different countries and contexts. The following recommendations are based on the major findings of the study.

### Recommendation 1

**The pre-service and in-service training of teachers to teach young learners needs to be considerably strengthened. The needs of in-service teachers are particularly acute, given that many did not start their careers as teachers of English or as teachers of young learners.**

Preferably, training programmes should be free (or very low cost), locally situated, of short duration, and focused. Given that the study, as well as the literature, shows that teachers often find CLT approaches and methodologies confusing, training should focus on aspects of language teaching for young learners that are highlighted as important by teachers, and on effective strategies reported in the research literature on young learners. Based on this study, these include the following areas in particular:

- Identifying strategies for managing large classes and dealing with discipline.
- Dealing with multi-level classes and with learners with a range of learning disabilities/difficulties.
- Developing and maintaining motivation.
- Examining the pros and cons of teaching grammar to young learners.
- Promoting key techniques and activities in language teaching to children, such as storytelling.
- Using and expanding the use of materials and resources, including those required by the syllabus and others, that can be exploited by the teacher.
- Assisting teachers to adapt pedagogic/syllabus models and methods to suit local conditions and contexts. Training should focus on the ‘particularity, practicality and possibility’ (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) of pedagogies, rather than the wholesale implementation of western approaches.

### Recommendation 2

**The interest shown in this project by a large number of teachers worldwide and the similarities in their activities and concerns demonstrate that there is a need for greater opportunities for sharing ideas and experiences amongst primary school teachers of English both nationally and internationally.**

Initiatives could include:

- Local teacher development groups, run by local YL teachers.
- Trainer training opportunities for YL teachers who can then support other teachers in their local schools.
- An international website for teachers where teachers can share ideas, experiences and activities, preferably run by YL teachers themselves rather than ‘experts’.
- On-line conferences and seminars for YL teachers, with contributions mainly from YL teachers themselves.
- Collaborative researcher-teacher practitioner research or reflective teaching initiatives.

### Recommendation 3

**The English language proficiency and skills of teachers is highly varied. There is clearly a need amongst many teachers for English language development.**

Initiatives could include:

- Strengthening strategic liaisons with local universities and English language training institutions for teacher English language development courses and refresher sessions. These could include informal arrangements such as English language social events or conversation clubs.
- Providing training sessions focusing on English as a classroom language and on the advantages and disadvantages of using both L1 and L2 in the classroom.
- Promoting further research on the specific needs of teachers of young learners in relation to English language development.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**An expanded range of materials for teaching young learners is needed. Materials development and their use should become a key area for research and development in the field. Materials need to be available in as many formats as possible to respond to local conditions. Possible formats include paper-based, CD-ROM, internet, and local media such as radio. As far as possible, materials should be of particular benefit to teachers working in poor schools in poor countries where resources are difficult to find and to afford.**

Such materials should be:

- Resource-light to accommodate contexts where there may be limited funding, facilities or equipment.
- Accompanied by full and simple instructions in order to assist teachers to use them effectively.
- Imaginative, and draw on local cultural understandings.
- Creative, to increase students' confidence in using English.
- Aimed at motivating young learners to learn English.

#### **Recommendation 5**

**In many countries, access to English development is restricted in terms of the amount of input young learners receive and the examination-driven nature of many syllabi. Educational policy developers should be provided with evidence based on current research and good practice in effective curriculum development for young learners in order to enhance the learning experience of children.**

Equal access to English is a concern arising from this research, particularly for children in poorer rural communities. There is noticeable disparity in the access different groups of children have to learning English and this disparity disadvantages many children from an early age, also creating difficult teaching conditions for teachers of English to young learners.

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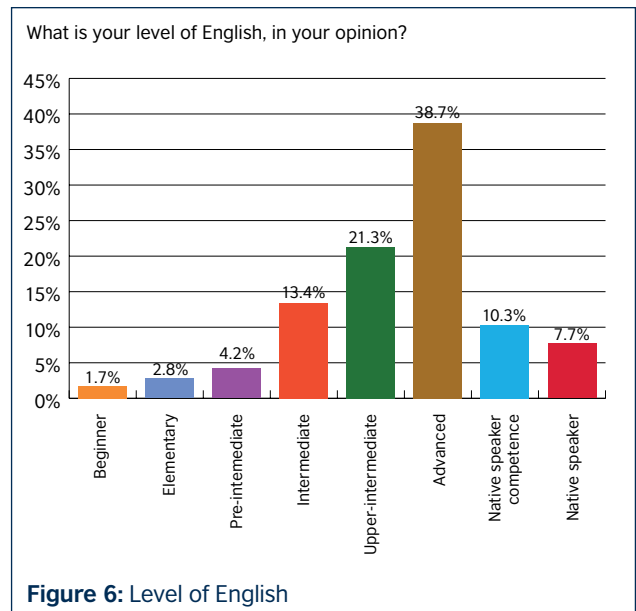
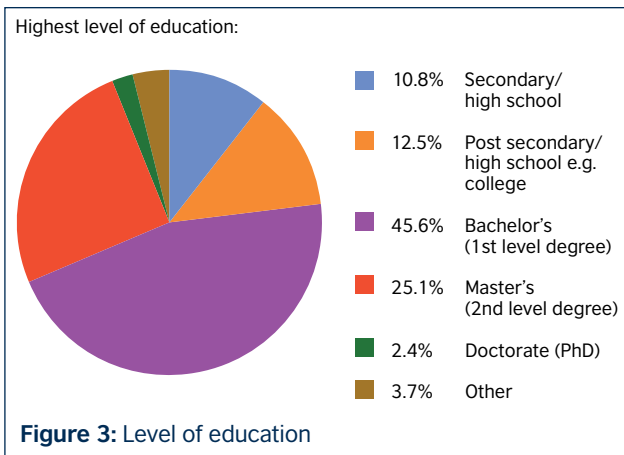
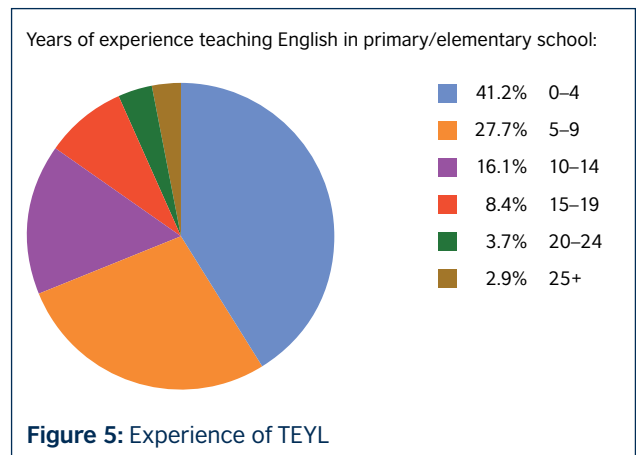
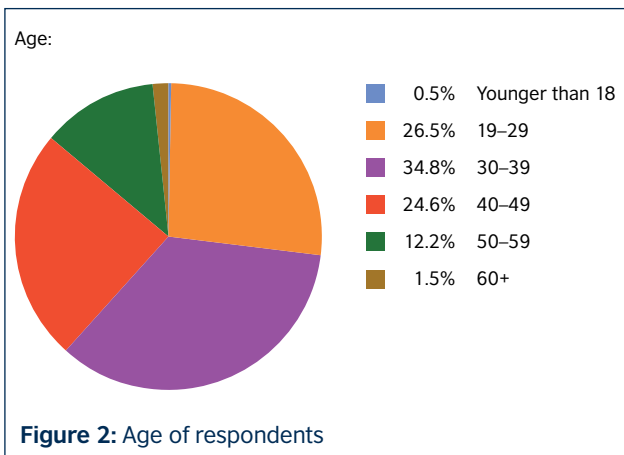
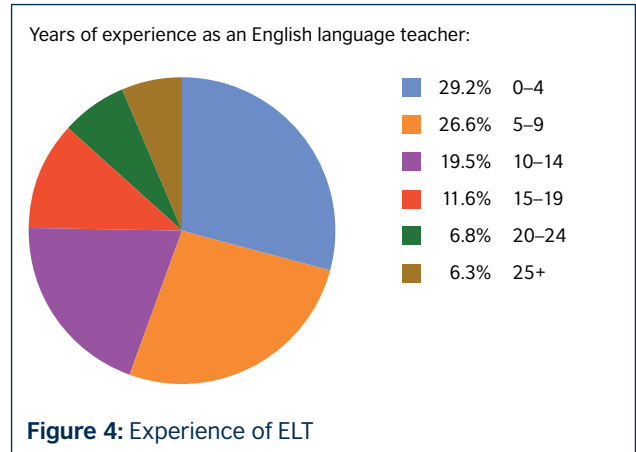
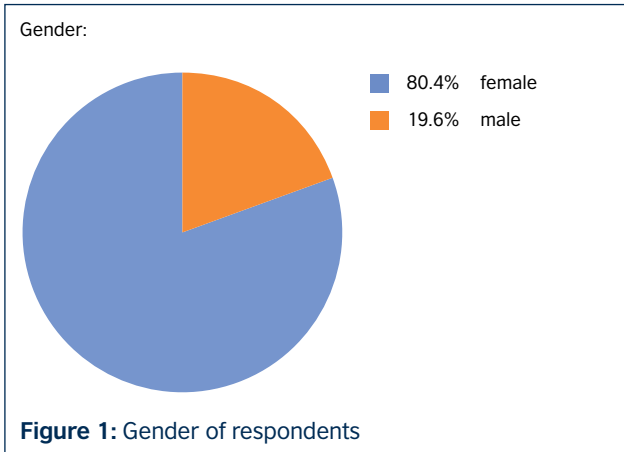


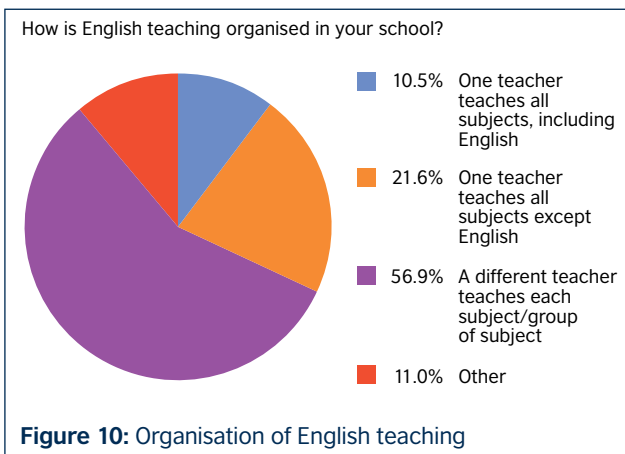
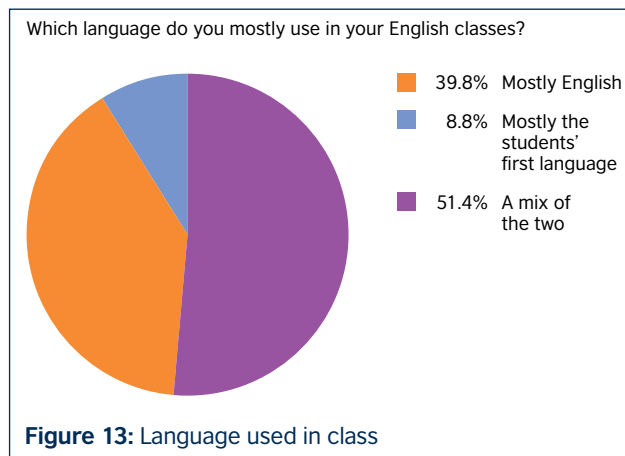
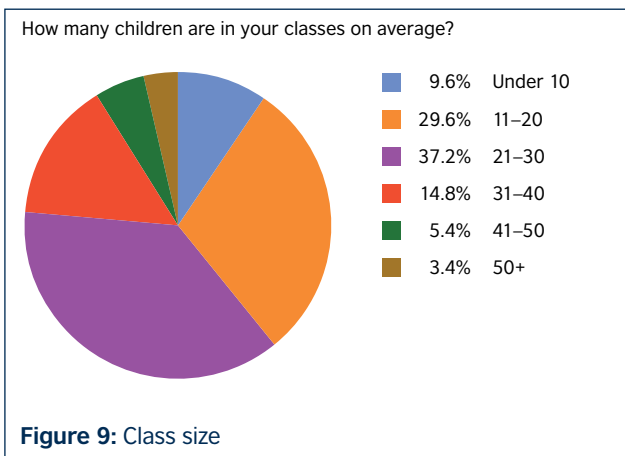
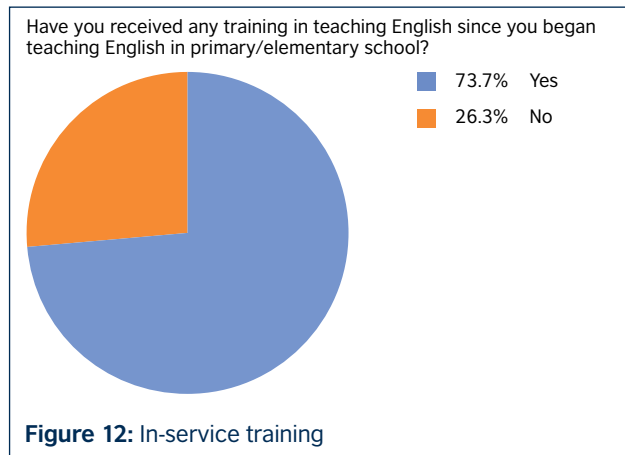
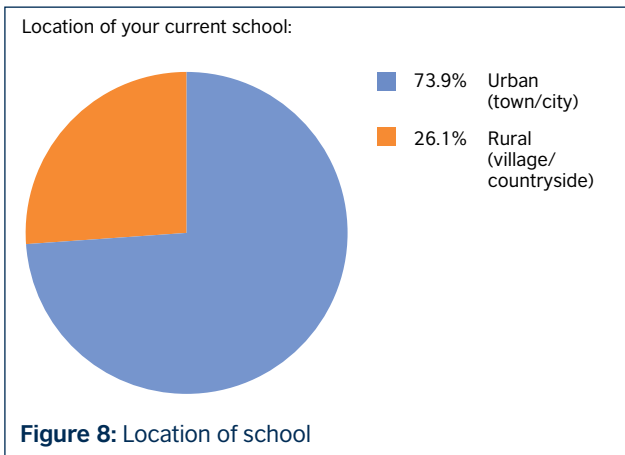
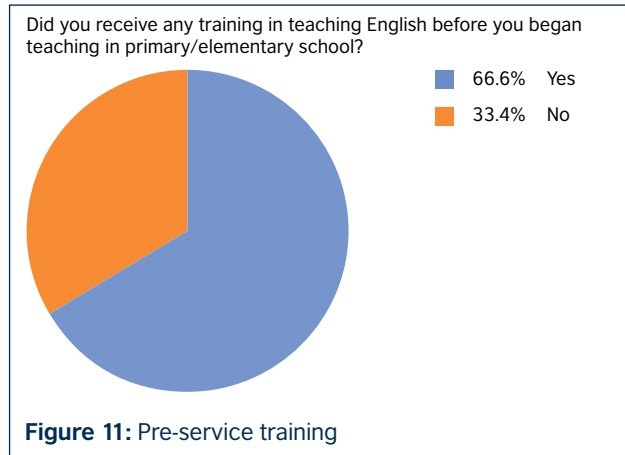
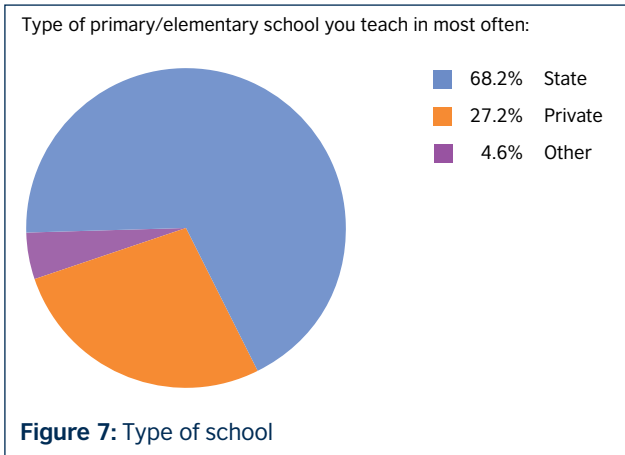
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# Appendix – Survey results





In your classes, which of the following do you think are most important for children in your class to learn?  
Please put them in order of importance for you from 1 to 7.  
(1 = most important and 7 = least important)

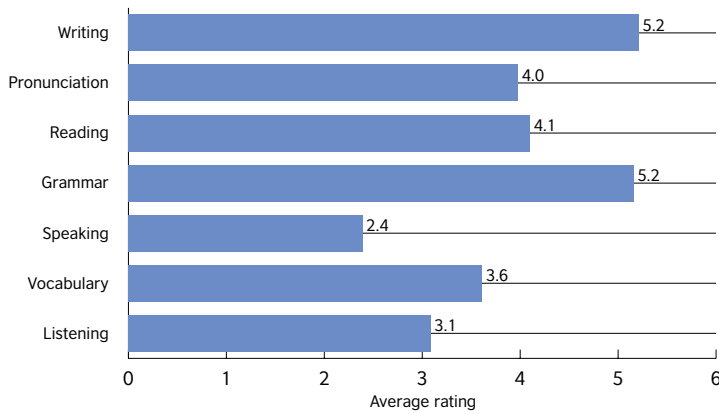


Figure 14: Importance of different skills

Here are some activities that are used in primary schools.  
How often do you use these activities in the class you teach most often?

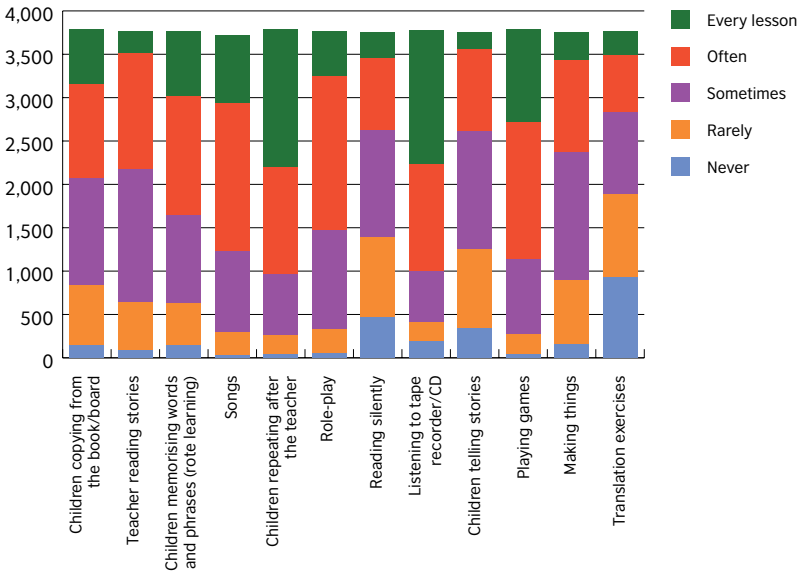


Figure 15: Frequency of activities used in class

Below are some more activities that are used in primary schools.  
How often do you use these activities in the class you teach most often?

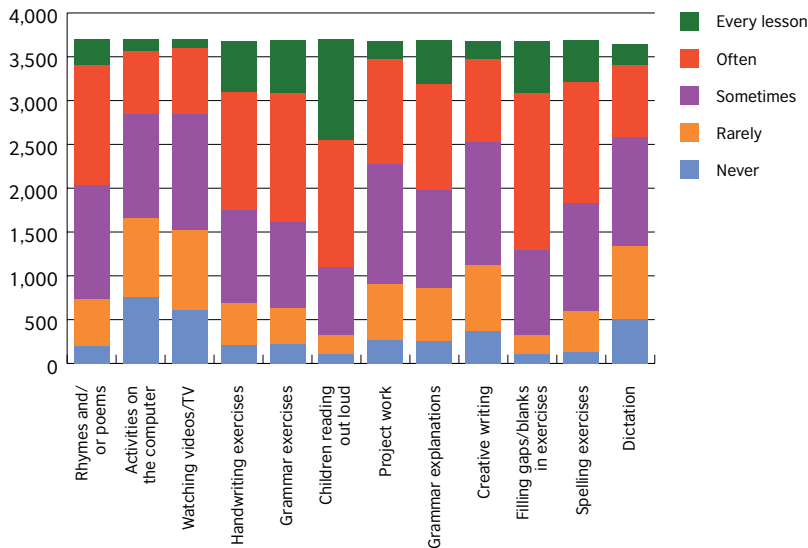
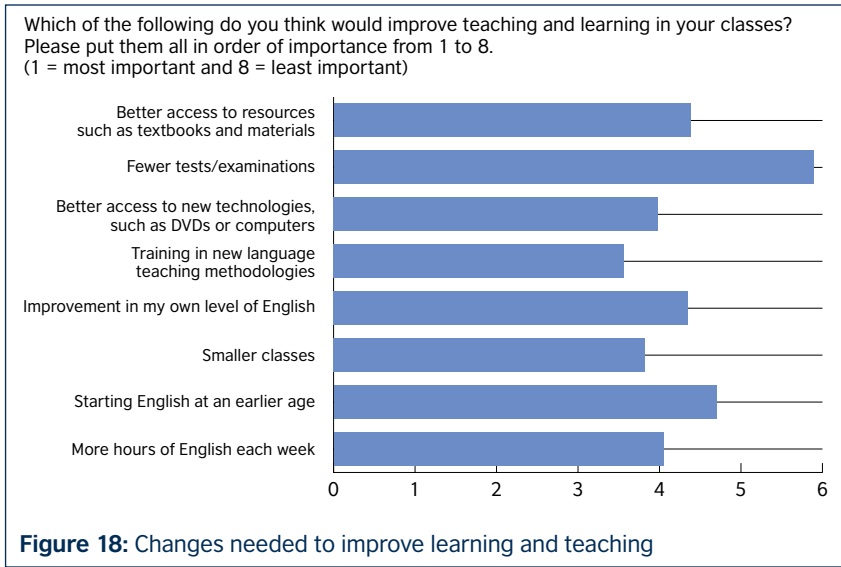
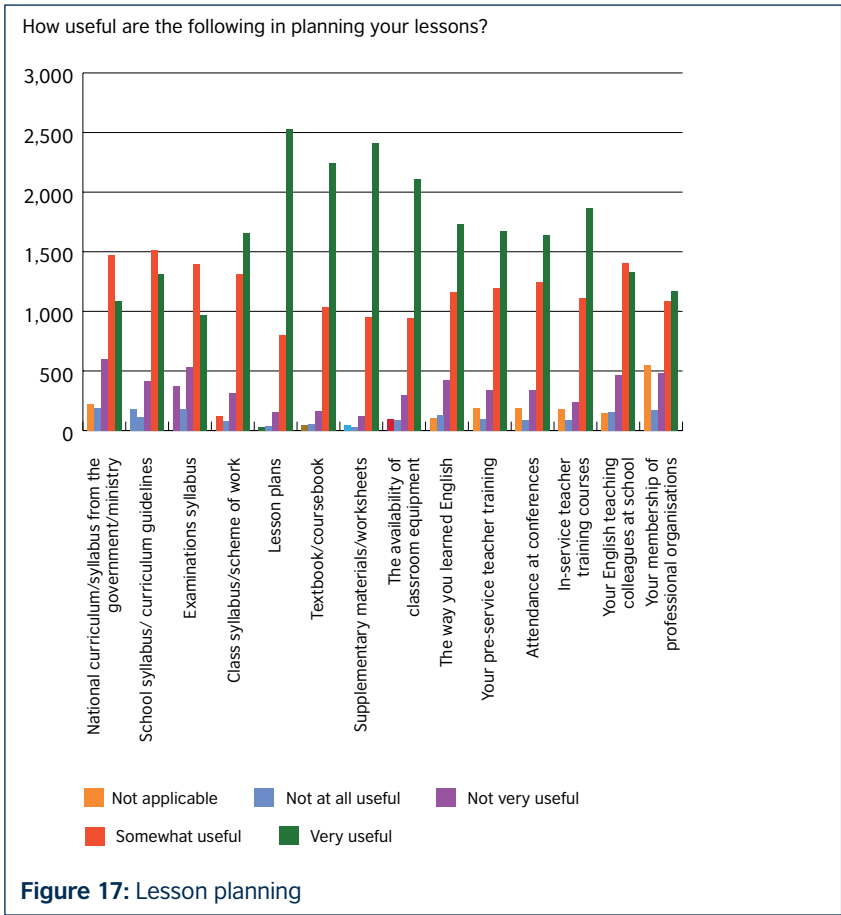


Figure 16: Frequency of activities used in class



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