

ELT Research Papers 13–08

Key factors and challenges in transition from primary to secondary schooling in ELT: an international perspective

Practical guidelines for working at transition levels

Anne Burns, Muna Morris-Adams, Sue Garton and
Fiona Copland, Aston University, Birmingham

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ISBN 978-0-86355-719-4

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London SW1A 2BN, UK

www.britishcouncil.org

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1. Introduction

English teachers all around the world are facing new challenges as governments introduce policies to teach English at much younger ages than in the past. In many countries, English is now compulsory, not just at the secondary or high school level, but from early stages of primary or elementary school. Despite this move, there is little research that documents what happens in practice when students move from learning English at the first level of learning to the next stage of learning and how they can be supported to make this change.

Typically, in many countries children move from one level to the next between the ages of approximately nine and 14. This move is usually referred to as a transition between stages of learning.

An important question that arises is: how does the English teaching that children experience at the early levels of learning prepare them for later levels of learning English? Another important question is: what can schools and teachers do to help children learning English who are moving from the primary level to the secondary level? So far, these questions appear to have been given only limited consideration in the rapid developments to introduce English learning at younger ages.

In this practical resource, we aim to address these key questions about transition. The resource is the result of a project we conducted with teachers around the world who are teaching students at these two levels. Our aim was to find out about teachers' experiences of the process of transition in their local contexts and to get their views on what would help schools, teachers and learners to manage transition more effectively. In presenting these practical ideas we are drawing extensively on the comments and suggestions that were made to us by 881¹ teachers in 62 countries, who responded to our request for information.

Some 393 of these teachers were teaching at the younger level of English learning. This is the level where students are in classes that finish off one stage of their education before they move on to the next. We refer to this as Level 1.

A further 486² of these teachers were teaching at the older level of English learning. This is the level where students are in classes where they begin their new stage of education. We refer to this as Level 2.

We use the terms Level 1 and Level 2 in this resource because different countries use different terminology and the move from one stage to the next happens at different ages.

¹ This reflects the number of respondents who completed the questionnaire beyond the first page. Questionnaires that were not completed beyond the first page, due to technical or other issues, were deleted. In addition, there are 12 questionnaires completed by Chinese teachers that were collected and translated after the cut-off point of the survey. While the qualitative comments are included in the analysis, the quantitative results are not included. This means the full number of responses is estimated at well beyond 1,000.

² The discrepancy to the total number of respondents is caused by two participants not answering at which level they were teaching (question 7).

2. How we conducted the research

In this research, we wanted to obtain a broad picture about transition practices across the world. In particular, our aim was to learn about the experiences and viewpoints of practising teachers at the two levels and to draw out from their comments practical guidelines and strategies that schools, or teachers in particular, could use to help their transition learners.

The main questions we want to address in these guidelines are:

1. What are the main teaching and learning issues that primary and secondary teachers perceive about transition?
2. What are ELT teachers' perceptions of their roles and responsibilities in relation to transition and what challenges do they face?
3. What similarities and differences in transition issues can be identified across different international contexts?

We collected information from teachers in two main ways:

1. Survey

We developed a survey that was sent out to teachers globally through the British Council, professional teacher associations and our own contacts in different countries. Teachers could respond to the survey electronically through SurveyMonkey or through hard copies if their access to technology was limited. Our survey allowed teachers to identify whether they taught at Level 1 or Level 2 and to respond to questions designed for their level (see Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey). The questions allowed for numerical responses as well as open responses where teachers could present their ideas on an issue.

2. Interviews

We also conducted interviews with teachers in various countries we were visiting during the course of the research. These countries were Cambodia, China, Ethiopia, Fiji, Indonesia, Japan, Hong Kong, Serbia and the United Arab Emirates. This range of locations gave us a wide geographical spread and we were able to discuss issues of transition with both Level 1 and Level 2 teachers. During the interviews we asked similar questions in each context so that we could gain perspectives on the same issues.

3. Who the resource is useful to

This resource uses the information we collected to offer suggestions for three possible groups of readers:

- policy administrators: those working in policy areas who may be able to gain insights from our data about how transition affects what happens at the classroom level
- school administrators: those working in school leadership and management who may be able to get new perspectives on what needs to be done to make transition smoother
- teachers: those working as classroom practitioners who may be looking for ideas to make the transition process more effective for their learners.

The main focus in the resource, however, is on what schools and teachers can do within their own contexts to assist transition processes.

In the next section, we provide a brief overview of some key points that arise in the literature on transition in English language learning. In the following sections, we identify more specific issues that were major themes in our data that can be considered by each group of readers. At the end of each section we present good practice strategies that could be used to improve the transition process.

4. What we found from previous studies

In general, many countries seem to be struggling to implement systematically the kind of links that would assist schools, students and teachers with effective transition. Although Kanno (2007: 68) is referring specifically to Japan, she reflects a more general viewpoint about what seems to happen when students move from Level 1 to Level 2: 'High schools continue to assume zero proficiency when [students] start their programs.'

More recently, Mahoney (2013) argues that teachers in Japan, particularly primary school teachers, are in need of 'outside assistance and support' (p. 3) to deal with the introduction since 2011 of compulsory foreign language teaching. He identifies building links between primary and junior high school teachers as a key source for support. These links would aim to: i) define teachers' roles; ii) give a basic idea of the content and goals of primary schools; and iii) share information to smooth school-level transitions. Mahoney reports that transition initiatives have been increasing since they were first proposed in 2006 (Matsukawa and Ohshita, 2007) but still have some way to go. His research, which surveyed 81 teachers, showed that primary school teachers in particular, were keen to establish links, and junior high Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) showed a high level of interest in an inter school level curriculum, possibly because of the challenge 'to teach English if they have to accept students from multiple elementary schools' (Goto Butler, 2007).

In Korea, the teaching of English at primary level was introduced in 1996. An impact study conducted by Kwon (2006) ten years after the introduction of compulsory English highlighted, among other findings, the continuing need for more effective links between primary and high school levels. Specifically, Kwon notes that in-service elementary teachers need to be taught about secondary English education, the curricula at both levels need to be developed to ensure smooth and close connections and that secondary and elementary school textbooks should be more closely linked 'to ensure a spiral development of the educational content' (p. 84).

Analyses relating to policy in the European context have raised similar issues. Noting that research on transition in foreign-language education is 'nearly non-existent', Rosa (2010:11) reports on a major collaborative project, *Pr-Sec-Co Primary and*

Secondary Continuity, among universities in seven countries (Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland) that sought to analyse the problem and make recommendations for smoother transition. One issue that is emphasised is that transition occurs at different ages in different countries, at nine to ten in Austria and Germany and 11–12 in the other countries, thus implying different cognitive readiness for secondary learning, which should be taken into account in transition processes.

In almost all the countries included in this research, although the transition between the two levels is mentioned in policy documents, there appeared to be no real continuity in the syllabus or in teaching practice and no guidelines to assist teachers. The exception was Sweden where English is compulsory from age 11 (since 1969), the curriculum encompasses all 12 years of schooling and assessment is continuous at key stages. Among the strategies for strengthening transition recommended by the project were: i) regular institutionally supported meetings for transition teachers; ii) systematic meetings for pupils and information for parents; iii) transitional materials that could be locally adapted; iv) bridging tasks that allow for engagement by both primary and secondary students (e.g. creating stories for each other); and v) records of student achievement (e.g. through a widely used tool such as the European Language Portfolio).

Again in the European context, a study conducted by Drew, Oostdam and van Toorenburg (2007) considered issues essential to the success of primary English language learning and particularly the transition from primary to secondary school. They collected survey data from 147 teachers and 153 teachers in the Netherlands and Norway respectively. They found that a high proportion of primary teachers in both countries had no formal qualifications to teach English nor had ever attended training courses. Although contact between Norwegian primary and secondary schools was reported, almost half of these contacts were mainly between school administrators and only a quarter of primary teachers claimed to know about the secondary syllabus and methodology. In the Netherlands, most schools claimed to have contacts with their feeder primary schools but contacts specifically for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in terms of curriculum or methodology were almost non-existent.

The researchers concluded that there was very little awareness of teaching at the other transition level. Although in general many teachers in both countries considered transition to be problematic, only a few had taken measures to address the issue. In Norway these included regular contacts and co-operation directed at aims and goals, teaching methodology and assessment and evaluation. Contact in the Netherlands was less regular and restricted to aims and learning goals. Despite policy differences of age of compulsory learning, contact hours and national curricula, the authors conclude that some challenges are common to both countries. One is the large number of primary EFL teachers with little or no formal training, which has a flow-on effect to teaching methodology and a lack of appropriate models for learning. Another is heavy reliance on textbooks with a consequent imbalance between written and spoken skills. The researchers recommend a national curriculum that would take into account the transition from primary to secondary, as well as systematic assessment of the skills students have acquired, both of which would lead to more effective transition. Finally, the authors advocate an adequate allocation of time per week if policy makers are to achieve their goals for successful early EFL learning.

5. Issues and strategies: policy

5.1 What we found in our study

In the survey, one of the questions the teachers were asked was:

If you could make one recommendation to your Ministry of Education about how to improve students' move from primary to secondary school English, what would it be?

The survey responses from both Level 1 and Level 2 teachers highlighted the substantial variations in official policy, and in national and local practices as well as the differences in official responses. A number of major issues emerged from this question.

Issue 1: in many countries, syllabus documents do not take into account continuity of content and methodology in the transition from Level 1 to Level 2

Sample quotes

Sustainable curriculum in which things learned at Level 2 is actually a continuation of those in Level 1. More detailed Level 1 curriculum applied nationally. (Level 2, Indonesia)

That they change the Level 2 syllabus to take into consideration that students are already bringing four years of English with them from Level 1 to Level 2. English was brought into the Level 1 curriculum in 2005 – the Level 2 syllabus remains the same. (Level 2, Portugal)

There must be a curriculum which allows to have a practical English class in order to enable the students' good performance in all skills when they are Level 2. (Level 1, Ethiopia)

Create frameworks of teachers (and students) to ease the transition. (Level 2, Israel)

Integrate English fully into the National Curriculum and plan accordingly. (Level 2, Portugal)

The curriculum should be related from Level 1 to Level 2. (Level 1, Thailand)

To have a look at the curriculum and then provide a more continuing kind of education. (Level 1, Turkey)

I would talk about an ongoing syllabus not teaching from zero point all the time. (Level 2, Turkey)

Although the majority of responses suggested that there were few formal mechanisms for linking curriculum content and methodology from Level 1 to Level 2, there were some notable exceptions such as Cuba, where transition was reported to be more formally managed:

'The strategies used for helping students move from Level 1 to 2 in Cuba are all contained in the curriculum and syllabuses for teaching English. All the syllabuses are designed for the teacher to follow a hierarchy in the level of the contents he/she has to teach, and when and how he/she has to teach it.' (Cuba)

Singapore is another example of a country that has developed a syllabus for English which covers both primary and secondary English language learning as a continuing process (English Language Syllabus, 2010).

Since introducing English at lower levels of the curriculum, it is gradually being recognised by policy makers that connections need to be made in curriculum, content, methodology and materials. For example, in the case of China, Wang (2007: 93) describes how this problem is being addressed.

'In many secondary schools, beginning students have to relearn what they had learned in primary school, wasting resources and meanwhile damaging student motivation but the new English curriculum unifies both primary and secondary school English into one continuum of development and divides ELT into nine competence-based levels with a required component for every students from Level 1 in primary 3 to Level 7 in senior secondary school.'

Issue 2: more systematic training opportunities, including those relating specifically to transition, are needed for teachers at Level 1 and Level 2

The teaching of English at primary school level is often introduced into educational systems without sufficient numbers of teachers qualified to teach English. This often means that many teachers who are assigned to teach English hold qualifications in other disciplines and have either received no training or insufficient training, such as short, intensive courses. These courses may teach little about the cognitive and social aspects of learning another language or include language development for the teachers

themselves. Teachers at the primary level who have not trained as language specialists may have little competence in using the language themselves, which means they rarely use English in class and therefore cannot provide good role models for their learners. As Kanno points out in relation to Japan: 'Most elementary schools do not have classroom teachers who are trained to teach English and must therefore rely on ALTs (assistant language teachers) or locally hired part-time instructors' (Kanno, 2007: 68). Teachers themselves are very aware of the need for better training opportunities, especially at Level 1, and these views were strongly expressed in the survey responses.

Sample quotes

[P]rovide short-time and intensive training on what has been previously learned. (Level 2, Algeria)

Train the teachers. (Level 2, China)

Teachers from school Level 1 must be trained in the process of teaching and learning of English. (Level 2, Colombia)

They have to invest in teacher training. (Level 2, Ethiopia)

Teachers should be required to have studied English beyond their own school experience and be methodologically trained to teach EFL to young learners. (Level 2, Germany)

Improve primary teachers of English training courses. (Level 1, Italy)

Make it possible for teachers [to] attend useful and practical seminars, conferences, workshops to raise their qualification by exchanging and presenting ideas, techniques and methods that would help teachers make this transition easier and more effective. (Level 2, Lithuania)

Stricter demands to qualifications for English teachers. Offer further training and courses for English teachers. (Level 2, Norway)

British Council Pakistan launched a professional development programme, the English for Teaching: Teaching for English (ETTE) project during 2008. Overall learning outcomes of this programme aim to help participants to develop their accuracy, fluency and confidence in using English in the English language classroom and their skills as reflective practitioners. This can help teachers to deliver good results. (Level 2, Pakistan)

I would ask them to make the English subject curricular and to hire far more qualified teachers. (Level 1, Portugal)

[A] better training of teachers. (Level 1, Senegal)

To encourage/train/retrain teachers in state schools to push students to learn 'something new' in each class. (Level 1, Spain)

[G]ive teachers more time to prove their qualifications with pupils. (Level 1, Tunisia)

[T]raining for teachers of English in all public schools in all parts of Turkey. (Level 1, Turkey)

Issue 3: there is a need to strengthen the source and supply of materials to specifically address the transition stage, which could be locally adapted as appropriate

Many teachers were critical of the kinds of materials they were required to use at the transition levels. In some cases, they reported that the content and material were pitched higher than the students could be expected to manage or that the material was inappropriate to the context of the students' learning. In some course books, even at Level 1, teachers felt there was too much emphasis on reading and writing skills, with insufficient attention paid to speaking and especially listening. Many teachers also felt they should have more say in the selection of course books, given their experiences in teaching at these levels.

Sample quotes

Provide supplementary teaching materials which contain the possible knowledge gap between Level 1 and Level 2. (Level 2, China)

[To] have English teachers at primary schools and more materials. (Level 2, Colombia)

The teaching-learning process should be supported by tangible materials and training should be given to teachers. (Level 1, Ethiopia)

[P]rovide good books with a low price and provide more free internet connection to the isolated areas. (Level 2, Indonesia)

I would suggest the use of different materials (web tools, songs) to teach grammar or other features of the language. (Level 1, Italy)

Choose appropriate textbooks that really relate to their age. (Level 1, Macedonia)

[T]o improve the internet network connection that is very weak in our schools: I would give more efficient English language acquisition to my students if I had a better Internet network. Because the British Council LearnEnglish websites are very useful for us as teachers but the internet network is very weak and slow. To revise the syllabus and adapt it to the new technologies of information communication using Facebook, yahoo, twitter, etc. To make manuals such as Stay tuned for Senegal available in sufficient number for all students from all levels. (Level 2, Senegal)

To invest early in the first level, to give more tools (books, audio, video materials ...). (Level 2, Senegal)

The teachers should choose the materials freely and the Ministry of Education should provide them. (Level 1, Turkey)

Issue 4: teachers at both levels want formal opportunities to establish links with their counterparts at primary or secondary school

There were many comments and suggestions about how schools and individual teachers themselves could work towards improving the transition stage for students learning English (see Sections 5 and 6). However, many teachers also wanted to see some form of policy recognition of the substantial changes involved for students during the transition period with more structured opportunities for teachers to learn about each other's respective levels of instruction and the kind of teaching and learning that is important for their students. Teachers who attended interview sessions often commented on how valuable they had found the opportunity to share ideas and expressed the view that they would like to see these kinds of opportunities made available more formally across school areas or regions.

Sample quotes

Teachers' visits from Level 2 to Level 1 schools. (Level 1, Bahrain)

[T]o organise the connect between the Level 1 teachers and Level 2 teachers as well as the talk between the students. (Level 1, China)

I will appreciate it if the ministry hold a meeting between the teachers in Level 1 and Level 2, giving the teachers more chances to contact each other. (Level 2, China)

Give the chance to an English teacher to teach in Level 1; this would be so amazing for both kids and teachers. (Level 2, Colombia)

More communication between teachers in both Level 1 and Level 2 schools. (Level 1, Croatia)

Send more Level 2 teachers to primary schools. (Level 2, Germany)

[T]o allow exchange and comparison among teachers of different scholastic level. (Level 1, Italy)

Teachers from Level 1 and Level 2 should have lessons together, so they can understand what they teach at school to each other. (Level 2, Japan)

More co-operation within and between schools. (Level 1, Macedonia)

I would recommend organising meetings with teachers from both levels, in order to help identify the most common problems and get solutions for them. (Level 1, Portugal)

That Level 1 and Level 2 transition should be more co-ordinated: organise meetings, seminars for teachers ... (Level 1, Spain)

[T]he ministry should organise some meetings/conferences to gather all the English teachers, both Level 1 and 2, to share ideas about teaching. (Level 2, Turkey)

5.2 Strategies can support transition: policy

Good practice in transition: formalise teacher committees and hold seminars on a regular basis

Organise compulsory committees to develop similar strategies and work together. There is a big gap between primary and secondary, and rare contact among professionals, although we started a seminar centred on this issue last year [2011–2012].

Good practice in transition: use regional or local networks to discuss transition strategies

The Ministry of Education organises meetings through pedagogic cells of teachers of English that meets every month in a school of the cluster members of the cell and that is the only official occasion the teachers meet together for interaction and the exchange of experiences.

Good practice in transition: work with teachers to reduce gaps in transition

It would be valuable for the ministry to discuss with teachers how to clarify national goals and develop regional statements for content, methodology and targets the students should reach.

6. Issues and strategies: schools

6.1 What we found in our study

Overall, the study shows that there is very limited activity on transition at school level. There were only two strategies where the majority of teachers indicated there was support and these both entailed the preparation of materials. Some 51.4 per cent of Level 1 teachers and 54.7 per cent of Level 2 teachers received support in preparing materials, while 63 per cent of Level 2 teachers indicated that their school developed materials to help students use the English they know. The data show that there are many problems with transition at school level. However, before exploring these issues, it is worth noting that there are far fewer problems with transition when students attend Level 1 and Level 2 in the same school. These comments reflect this reality:

Sample quotes

Our school is the nine-year compulsory school. We have two levels and the teachers from different levels make the English teaching plans. We can do the preparation well because the student teachers of different levels have regular meetings during the school year. (Level 1, China)

I'd just like to reconfirm that our school is a small international school. The transition is made within the same building and Level 1 and 2 teachers know one another and work closely together. The information above is not valid if students plan to move to a different school for Level 2 (unless it also has an American curriculum). (Level 1, Saudi Arabia)

Level 1 and 2 are in the same place in my school. Students of Level 1 meet students of Level 2 many times: there is no big rupture between the two levels. During the year, students of Level 2 come to the classes of Level 1 to explain what has changed for them and how they have to adapt and organise themselves in the different subjects they have. (Level 1, Portugal)

It seems that being close physically and sharing a management structure provides opportunities for students to meet and play with each other and for teachers to talk to each other about the students and monitor their progress. In these schools, transition is locally and effectively managed causing the least amount of stress to students and teachers.

Most schools do not enjoy such close relationships with each other and a very high percentage of teachers responded there was no contact or co-operation between the two levels, although there were some notable exceptions (see Strategies section below).

Interestingly, teachers at both Level 1 and Level 2 tended to blame Level 1 schools for the lack of interaction between the two levels rather than considering that both schools at both levels had a role to play in finding solutions to transition issues.

Issue 1: in many countries contact between teachers at different levels may be ad hoc or non-existent

One of the biggest issues identified by the teachers is that there is no contact organised between teachers from Level 1 and Level 2. As such, any planning, understanding or simple information sharing is impossible. This lack of contact underpins many of the other issues identified below.

Sample quotes

There is no co-ordination between the English teachers from Level 1 and Level 2. (Level 1, Spain)

I think the biggest problem is the lack of communication between Level 1 and Level 2 school teachers. Also, most of the children are really scared and confused when they come to Level 2 schools and the teachers there haven't got enough information about the students. (Level 1, Croatia) Teachers at primary school often don't know school programmes at middle school so they don't prepare students for different aspects of the language. (Level 2, Italy)

Issue 2: there is little continuity in the syllabus from Level 1 to Level 2

A problem identified by both Level 1 and Level 2 teachers was the fact that teachers seemed to assume they had to start from the beginning once students reach Level 2. This situation was seen partly as a result of lack of co-ordination, and partly as a result of heterogeneous classes at Level 2 (see Issue 3 below for more detail). Interestingly, at both Level 1 and Level 2 there were teachers who did not view a new start as a bad thing.

Sample quotes

There is no smooth transition from Level 1 to Level 2; rather, just cutting off on one level and starting on the next. (Level 1, Malaysia)

In fact in Turkey, when you start a good high school, you start over your English learning, which is a must in my opinion! (Level 2, Turkey)

The central problem is starting all over again: many schools start from the beginning as if nothing has been done. There should be more sharing of curriculum and teaching approaches. Some students get demotivated at the beginning of Level 2 since they spend a whole term, or longer, reviewing vocabulary and structures learnt at Level 1. (Level 2, Portugal)

Issue 3: students transitioning to Level 2 have different levels of English competence

Perhaps understandably, the biggest issue, especially for Level 2 teachers, was the range of competence in English of students coming from Level 1. Teachers identified a number of reasons for the differences in levels, including the fact that Level 2 schools take students from a number of different Level 1 schools, and there are also disparities caused by different socio-economic backgrounds. Part of the problem was also seen as the lack of information that Level 2 teachers receive from Level 1 schools about individual students.

Sample quotes

The levels at the end of primary are very heterogeneous. So, in secondary they have to start with the very basic things again. Moving forward is really difficult. (Level 1, Spain)

Some are from big cities and some are from poor areas and their English level is quite different. And also, in the same school some of them are quite different. Some of them are much better off and some of them are poor. So maybe their age is Junior 1 but their level is Primary 3 or 4. But in China's system we have to keep them in Junior 1. So it's quite difficult for them to follow the teacher. (Level 2, China)

Students who are beginners are in the same class with the other students. Developing English language skills effectively isn't possible. (Level 2, Turkey)

Issue 4: the methodologies used to teach English are very different at Level 1 and Level 2

Teachers at both Level 1 and Level 2 pointed to difficulties caused by different approaches to language teaching at Level 1 and Level 2. A number indicated that, while Level 1 classes emphasise activities involving speaking, vocabulary, games and stories, Level 2 often sees a major shift to more serious approaches, with an emphasis on grammar, reading and writing. Others stated that the amount of English used in class increases at Level 2, which can be stressful for the students. It is not clear whether these changes in methodology are a school issue, a national issue, or are even dependent on individual teachers, but the perception that they are a challenge in transition is quite widespread.

Sample quotes

Some schools in Level 1 are carrying out CLIL projects, while in Level 2 CLIL disappears. Level 1 is much more student-centred and 'learning by doing'. (Level 1, Spain)

Level 1 students often have many games during the classes, and hardly any attention is paid to preparing students for English exams. When they come to high school poorer students are overwhelmed by teachers' demands when it comes to writing skills, both essays and articles. (Level 2, Macedonia)

They feel scared when they suddenly have a teacher who speaks English all the time and wants them to interact and speak English too. (Level 2, Portugal)

Issue 5: students and parents are not always aware of the different expectations at Level 2

A number of teachers pointed to the wider difficulties that students experience when moving from Level 1 to Level 2. These issues are not just concerned with English but clearly have an impact in all subjects. Teachers mentioned different expectations, different school culture, different organisation and so on.

Sample quotes

This transitional period is very difficult for students, they are in completely new surroundings, they are forming new relationships, they have to develop new social bonds and, last but not least, they have to assess their level of language competence with their peers' knowledge and skills. On top of that, there is a teacher who is trying to instil in them new rules of language behaviour. Mostly, they are at a loss. And so is the teacher. (Level 2, Poland)

The complexity of the transition from one level to another is not because of learning something difficult in the English language, but the need to adapt to new requirements. Almost all subjects in Level 1 school are taught by one teacher (maybe except English, music and physical training lessons). In Level 2 school, all subjects are taught by different teachers. Mostly, all teachers are new. To adapt to this situation is a little bit difficult for children. (Level 1, Ukraine)

Issue 6: there is often a lack of school-based resources

Teachers at both levels identified either a lack of, or inappropriate, resources as an issue in dealing with the transition from Level 1 to Level 2. Level 2 teachers (but not Level 1 teachers) also complained that their classes are too big to be able to deal effectively with the needs of the students as they adapt to their new school. Hours a week given over to English and poor infrastructure were also mentioned. Although resource issues may not appear to be directly linked to transition, they become important when considered in the light of the issues around teaching mixed levels, preparing students for the transition and in terms of ensuring students in transition are treated fairly and equally.

Sample quotes

Another important reason is the lack of resources the schools have to teach a foreign language, such as, books, CDs, smart boards, laptops, etc. (Level 2, Colombia)

All students from Level 1 should study English for at least 300 minutes per week. They should also be given more English periods during their Level 2.

Well, we need an internet connection all the time, intelligent classrooms, a low number of students per class (15–20) – I am working with 40–50 students (it's impossible). (Level 1, Ukraine)

6.2 What strategies can support transition: schools

Good practice in transition: hold information meetings for Level 1 parents and students

Our school administration, together with the class teachers, organise visits for children to Level 2 schools, hold information meetings for parents of students who are moving and make contact with the Level 2 school English teachers. (Level 1, Lithuania)

Good practice in transition: organise meetings between Level 1 and Level 2 teachers

We use a curriculum-mapping site so that teachers from Level 1 and Level 2 can view each other's curriculums. (Level 1, Turkey)

Good practice in transition: organise meetings across schools but within levels

We hold what we call school cluster workshops where teachers of English in Level 2 meet and discuss common problems and find possible solutions to the problems in the teaching of English in secondary schools. (Level 2, Malawi)

Good practice in transition: organise reciprocal observation and teaching

T3: Last term we had the demonstration classes, comparing the primary school teachers' teaching method and the junior high school teachers' methods.

R: For the other teachers to watch was it?

T1: Other teachers, yes.

T3: Not just teachers from our school but teachers from the district came.

T1: Very formal.

T3: Yes.

FC: So teachers come and watch you do a model lesson.

T3: Yes. Yes.

(Interview, China)

Good practice in transition: organise periods of exchange where Level 1 teachers teach in Level 2 schools and vice versa

As I mentioned before, the school sent me to primary school because there was a lack of English teachers, so I was completely left on my own and I even was a bit worried whether I could manage it or not. But in the end it was the best experience I could have had and I got a much better feel of how to teach the little ones. And I am still benefiting from these two years at primary school teaching Level 2 students and the older ones. (Level 2, Germany)

Good practice in transition: provide a common introductory text

In one school, the department writes a 'pre-text' to basically review and bridge what incoming students should know in relation to what they need to know to start the textbook. They spend the first month of the Level 2 curriculum working through this text. It is extremely basic, teaches the alphabet, phonetics and a few hundred vocabulary items. It effectively levels the learning field so all students, almost regardless of previous experience, are 'starting' with the textbook from the same point. (Level 2, Japan)

Good practice in transition: introduce Level 1 students to the Level 2 syllabus before they move schools

We introduce Level 2 English to those who have just finished Level 1 during the 'holiday programme' so that they will be prepared for Level 2. (Level 1, Malaysia)

Good practice in transition: offer taster sessions of Level 2 classes

We have been running since 2004 some lessons of German, French and Spanish in order to guide our students in the last year of primary school (five classes), in order to choose the second foreign language at the lower secondary level and to help them to understand the importance of the different European languages, overcoming prejudices and fashions. (Level 1, Italy)

Good practice in transition: organise visits to schools so Level 1 students can see Level 2 lessons in action

The most motivating thing is for the first-year students to see second-year students communicating in English with their teachers or some games and songs they may hear or see during their classes. (Level 1, Senegal)

Good practice in transition: organise an induction programme for students

The children go through a bridging course in the summer before they go to secondary school. It is only about a week and it introduces the culture, the rules, the subjects of secondary schools. They are run by the secondary schools. (interview, Hong Kong)

Good practice in transition: work with parents and students to ensure they are fully informed

Teachers give advice to students about some differences and organise additional classes for students who wish to go. There are something like 'career days' where students can learn all about the variety of secondary schools and what those schools demand. If English is necessary and students are not confident they take extra classes. They may visit those schools, but it is rarely organised by the primary school because of the vast variety (different types of secondary schools). (Level 1, Croatia)

Organise portfolios of work done at Level 1 that students can show Level 2 teachers.

Good practice in transition: organise portfolios of work that Level 1 students can show Level 2 teachers

You should ask them for their portfolio. The teachers always ask them to keep a portfolio of the writing they do, so they can show this when they go for a secondary-school interview. (interview, Hong Kong)

Good practice in transition: where possible, Level 1 and Level 2 should follow the same book series so that it is clear what has been covered and how language can be built up.

Our school has all levels – primary, middle and high schools – together. The English teachers of all levels collaborate a lot. Sometimes the same teacher teaches students from primary to high school. We have good course books that we have been using for many years in a row. There are about 12 English teachers in our school. We are all friendly and helpful to each other and we eagerly share our experiences and materials. Also, we attend numerous qualification programmes in order to learn about new methods and techniques. (Level 2, Lithuania)

7. Issues and strategies: teachers

7.1 What we found in our study

The data suggest that the responsibility for managing transition often falls to individual teachers. However, some of the major challenges shared by teachers across the world relate to issues which are not limited specifically to the transition period, but are omnipresent. Teachers mentioned, for example, very large classes: 40–50 students in Colombia, Nepal (45+ students) and Iraq (up to 60 students). Lack of resources and limited access to modern technology were also reported, for example in Malawi, Turkey and Ethiopia. Heterogeneous classes and motivation are not exclusively related to transition, but they appear to have additional impact at the transition stage.

Issue 1: Levels 1 and 2 often have different pedagogical aims

The great majority of the survey responses show that teachers are very aware of potential pedagogical difficulties during the transition period, both for teachers and students.

The comment below from a Brazilian Level 1 teacher encapsulates key issues:

‘In my opinion, the greatest difficulty for these students in transition is the change of focus on English classes and the type of activities given by teachers. There is a huge gap between teaching practices at Level 1 and teaching practices at Level 2, where classes are more formal, even though students are still immature for that.’ (Brazil Level 1, Q 17)

Although national approaches vary widely, at Level 1, there is an overwhelming preference for focusing on speaking and listening. Tinsley and Comfort (2012: 77) point out that there is no apparent consensus on when all four skills should be introduced at the primary level. In some countries, such as Malaysia, an exam-based system at Level 1 requires students to learn grammar and writing, while in others, for example, Japan and Korea, the emphasis in the early years is exclusively on speaking and listening.

At Level 2, therefore, the introduction of all four skills presents challenges and lack of continuity and lack of agreement on what should be taught at the two levels can have a negative effect on both teachers and students. In some cases there were contradictory responses from teachers in the same country (see quotes from Spain). Therefore, it is not just at national, but also at local school levels that different pedagogical aims may be pursued

Sample quotes (for Level 1)

The focus of teaching English in Level 2 schools is grammar and grammar and some more grammar and my focus is more on fluency than accuracy so it is challenging to make these two focuses meet. (Croatia)

In general, there isn't a smooth transition between the demands of Level 1 and Level 2. Level 1 focuses on vocabulary and maybe listening, but there's little reading and writing practice. In Level 2, they are expected to have a certain level of grammar awareness which they don't have. (Colombia)

Due to an exam-oriented system, there's an over-emphasis on writing. (Malaysia)

The students can write and read correctly, but can not communicate well in English. (Malaysia)

They are not well trained in all the four skills of the language. In my case, reading and writing. (Ethiopia)

Students become fluent but lack accuracy in both speech and writing. Students who do not experience success at Level 1 may self-label as 'bad at English' when they still have so much time to learn ahead of them. (Turkey)

At Level 1 the emphasis is on games and fun activities and peer interaction. When they get to Level 2 they are totally unprepared for the emphasis on grammar and written work. At Level 2 little time is devoted to conversation and oral interaction. (Italy)

Kids don't learn any grammar points at primary school (even the articles and the conjugation of the verbs 'to be' and 'to do'). (Tunisia)

We prepare them in terms of fluency and oral skills in general. (Spain)

They are taught a lot of grammar but little speaking. (Spain)

Level 2 teachers commented on the impact of the types of skills taught at Level 1 and how the focus on speaking and listening created challenges when students began Level 2 courses.

Sample quotes (for Level 2)

Reading and writing is not taught at Level 1, so after two years of only listening and speaking the students are completely confused when suddenly confronted with writing versus pronunciation. They are also used to a very playful approach and often do not adjust well to structured or goal-oriented language learning. (Germany)

Some Level 1 schools don't teach students English well; some schools teach the students informally, which makes the students think speaking is the only thing to learn English for; they don't know how to remember the words, they don't know they will be asked to write English in exams. The pressure from exams and remembering new words will bring the new Level 2 students big problems. (China)

Level 1 students experience English as something to be played, while Level 2 students experience English as something to be studied. The radical step from play to study seems to disappoint many students, especially when they discover that they have to make an effort to learn (as with their L1). (Japan)

Some students come from Level 1 unable to read or write in English. (Bahrain)

As they have little knowledge of English grammar this is the biggest challenge. (Spain)

Tinsley and Comfort (2012:68) stress that 'transition between educational phases should ensure that students can build on prior learning.' This seems to be far from being the case in many of the respondents' countries, though there are some notable exceptions, such as Cuba and Hong Kong.

Issue 2: there are different methodological approaches at levels 1 and 2.

Different approaches to teaching young learners at levels 1 and 2 were also seen as a major problem.

This difference focused on the informality of Level 1 approaches in contrast with the much more formal learning of Level 2. Many teachers also pointed out that the change in approach could have negative effects and be a cause of students not making adequate progress at Level 2. They also drew attention to particular aspects of teaching methodology, which were not felt to be effective, such as rote-learning. However, there was not always agreement on the effectiveness of specific approaches.

Sample quotes for Level 1

There is a big gap between Level 1 and 2 in: methodology, content of books, project working, oral versus written work, informal versus formal, context-based versus grammar-based... (Spain)

Primary-school English is informal while junior middle-school English is very formal so it takes time for the learners to get used to. (China)

The Level 1 English is very informal (games, stories, songs) whereas Level 2 is very formal (grammar explanations). (Japan)

Level 2 features significantly more formal work in English (grammar, vocabulary), as opposed to Level 1, which is highly informal and more well rounded. (South Korea)

In some cases L1 is based completely on games, singing and speaking activities, while L2 starts without any transition time with a lot of reading and writing, plus grammar practice, which is all completely new to students. (Croatia)

Usually teachers at Level 2 prefer other styles of teaching/learning English. (Poland).

From an informal way they change into formal and they hate it!! (Argentina)

Because teachers generally use grammar translation and old strategies, they don't teach useful English in a natural way. They teach foreign languages like they teach maths. (Turkey)

Too traditional methodologies centred on memorisation, vocabulary and grammar. (Portugal)

Our teaching system is too old. Just grammar, grammar and grammar. (Spain)

The teaching methodology used to teach Level 1 is mostly based on rote-learning and memorisation. They are not taught the basic language skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking and thinking. (Pakistan)

Primary school students learn only songs without knowing their meanings. (Tunisia)

This (preparedness for Level 2) depends greatly on the teachers they had at primary school. Generally speaking, Level 1 students tend to have a good knowledge of various vocabulary sets, such as family, sports, animals, etc., because most of the teaching is topic-based. However, the method of teaching changes significantly at Level 2, becoming more traditional and grammar-based. Students at Level 2 are expected to cope with lengthy grammar explanations therefore, to be able to understand and use the relevant metalanguage, which often they are not equipped with. The communicative approach does not seem to be used at all in Italian state schools. (Italy)

Issue 3: students have different levels of English language skills

An issue that presented particular difficulties for Level 2 teachers was that students make the transition from Level 1 with widely varying English language skills. This problem relates to some extent to Issue 1, that there is a lack of agreement on pedagogical aims for Level 1 students, who may, for example, only have been taught either productive or receptive skills. Wider issues, however, also play a part, many of them being beyond the educational system to influence, as the quotes below highlight.

Sample quotes from Level 2 teachers

Because the students from more than ten different Level 1 in our school, and some of them are from rural areas where there is no professional English teacher, even the maths or history teacher teach English there. That is the reason why some of the students can not open their mouth to speak English, even though they have learnt English for more than seven years. (China)

Not all schools all over the country teach English at Level 1, but those located in big cities mostly do. Yet the amount of teaching in different schools varies. Besides, students in big cities tend to be exposed to more English since they usually also take extra

English lessons after school. Therefore, it is very likely that they are more prepared for learning in Level 2 compared to their peers from rural areas. (Indonesia)

It depends on whether they come from a private or a governmental school, since children coming from private schools are usually better prepared than the others. (Israel)

Some of them come from private-sector schools, where mostly they study everything in English (maths, science, etc.) – they usually don't have problems, but those who come from the public schools, their level of English is somehow low, they need extra hours. (United Arab Emirates)

I have a reservation about groups of 40 students with different English levels, some of them with cognitive problems, few educational materials and teachers with levels A1 or A2. (Colombia)

The students are at different levels when they start at Level 2 (my school). Sometimes there are clear individual differences when it comes to their ability to learn a foreign language. In other cases there are sometimes signs that make us believe that the quality of the English teaching programmes or the qualifications of the English teachers in the various schools at primary level influences the level of the students when they start in Level 2 schools. (Norway)

It seems to me that the main reason is that children come from different educational backgrounds, by which I mean that they were in different primary schools, had different textbooks (although they are based on the same curriculum), they were taught by different teachers who either focused on games and songs and somehow neglected grammar issues or, conversely, skipped all the fun focusing on making children remember long word lists and all the grammar rules, thus creating a negative attitude for language learning. (Yemen)

7.2 What strategies can support transition: teachers

Good practice in transition: make contact with teachers at the other level

We individually try to make contact with Level 2 school teachers and we inform them about the students who begin at Level 2 schools. We suggest our students listen to English music and see films in English because through this they can understand speaking English is not complex. We advise them to speak English when they are together. (Level 1, Turkey)

Good practice in transition: find out what students have been taught

The school (as an institution) may not make contact with Level 1 school English teachers but all our teachers try to find out what is being taught at the nearby primary school. We ask befriended parents, we go through the other school's website to see what course books they use, we use placement tests to assess our students' knowledge. I think that we are quite knowledgeable about what the syllabus in the primary is and what our pupils are supposed to have mastered. The school authorities are also keen on hosting our students-to-be parents, answering questions and collecting information about students' capacities. (Level 2 teacher, country not identified)

Good practice in transition: spend time revising what students have learned

We have English workshops for students to revise the main learning points. (Level 1, Malaysia)

Good practice in transition: provide additional learning materials to prepare students for the learning needed at transition

In my respective school, we do prepare different worksheets for the leaving students. We arrange extra tutorial sessions for the students to do the last exam papers together. (Level 1, Ethiopia)

Good practice in transition: discuss the different teaching approaches students will experience

Level 2 is mostly seen only as a continuation of Level 1. Teachers give advice to students about some differences and organise additional classes for students who wish to go. There are something like 'career days' where students can learn all about the variety of secondary schools and what those schools demand. If English is necessary and students are not confident they take extra classes. They may visit those schools, but it is rarely organised by the primary school because of the vast variety (different types of secondary schools). (Level 1, Croatia)

Good practice in transition: at Level 1, gradually introduce the more formal learning approaches of Level 2

In the final year of Level 1 we give lessons in a rather similar way to Level 2, as in the teaching method, the English structure we used in class, the form of exams, etc. So students will face less difficulty when they enter Level 2. (Level 1, China)

Good practice in transition: at Level 2, maintain some of the less formal learning approaches of Level 1

I prepare transitional material, which hopefully lies somewhere between the informality of Level 1 and the formality of Level 2. I aim for an intermediate 'plastic' multidimensional English ... role-plays, miming vocabulary, puzzles, games, etc., mixed with 'literate' English. (Level 2, Portugal)

Good practice in transition: encourage students to keep practising their English before they enter Level 2

Most of the strategies, if not all, applied are my own as the schools hardly interfere with such, specially regarding the learning of English. It is all up to the teacher. The most successful strategy I use is the implementation of rich vocabulary, as much as possible, so that the transition can be somehow easier. I do that by working on individual songs the students really enjoy, and make sure they are enthusiastic enough to memorise such songs over the summer holidays. I also encourage them to watch TV channels, such as Disney or Cartoon Network, over their holidays. (Level 1, Portugal)

Good practice in transition: at the beginning of Level 2, provide students with a period of time for consolidation of what they know

We try to cover all material that has been learned in the first level and revise. We also allow a few weeks for the revision. (Level 2, Turkey)

Good practice in transition: acknowledge in a positive way the English students have already learned

Take into account they have learnt more at primary school than secondary school teachers often think. Work in a way that allows revision for poor students but also improvement for good students. (Level 2, Spain)

Good practice in transition: develop strategies to motivate students

Provide incentive awards for the best student who speaks English. Provide websites for language learning. Form groups for the dramatisation of stories in English. (Level 2, Ecuador)

8. Conclusion

This resource focuses on what happens when students make the transition from learning English at primary level (Level 1) to learning English at secondary level (Level 2). It aims to illustrate from the perspective of English teachers in many different countries across the world their roles, responsibilities and challenges in relation to transition. It also aims to identify the key issues the teachers raised and to provide practical ideas, based on good practices they are already using to deal with transition.

We hope that the insights provided by the teachers will help to inform curriculum policy and planning, and to encourage school administrators to work towards more effective transition for English learning, so that the knowledge and experiences students acquire at Level 1 are not lost at Level 2 and so that students do not become demotivated about learning English. Teachers worldwide clearly feel a need to know more about how to deal with issues and challenges in primary-secondary transition and to be supported with strategies for addressing this need.

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