

A global revolution? Teaching English at primary school

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In this paper we briefly explore the phenomenon of the trend towards an early start in English internationally, drawing jointly on our substantial experience of working in the field and on data from an international seminar held in Bangalore, India and subsequently published papers (Enever, Moon & Raman 2009). Here, we aim to highlight issues and raise questions about primary English language teaching (PELT) policy and implementation.

Educational reform on a global scale

Whilst the term 'global revolution' may, at first, appear something of an overstatement, established researchers such as Johnstone (2009) and Graddol (2010) have identified this policy shift as radical, with a far-reaching impact. Consider the following recent developments: the number of countries now introducing English, or making it compulsory at primary levels for the first time (for example: English will be compulsory from primary Gd 5 in Japan in 2011, in Vietnam English will soon become compulsory from Gd 3); other countries where English is already taught at primary level, now lowering the start age still further (Poland, Kosovo); and still other countries where English has been recently introduced as a medium of instruction or employing a model of bilingualism (Cameroon). In some contexts, such large-scale reform has provoked heated debate, with concerns from many perspectives.

Ever younger, young learners

Increasingly, both parents - who want the best for their children - and markets, responding to new openings for business, are seeking English for their babies, toddlers and pre-schoolers. In S Korea, for example, economic prosperity has heightened the demand for an ever-earlier start in the school system, resulting in a wide diversity of provision in both private and state sectors (Lee, 2009: 99). He identifies such initiatives as English villages and camps, an English-only city, an attempt to employ 500 native speakers of English as school teachers in S Korea (fairly unsuccessful), provision of additional after-school English lessons and English educational broadcasting as just some of the initiatives currently being explored.

However, Lee reports on the current limited supply of qualified teachers and the urgent need to overcome this.

Given these recent developments, it seems that the term 'young learner' has now become misleading in its attempt to encompass an age range from birth (or even the foetus stage, in some contexts!) to 18 years perhaps. More precise descriptors are needed today, to ensure that age appropriate approaches to teaching and learning are fully developed and that we avoid repeating the history of a 'broad brush' approach which assumed a structural syllabus with 'fun-ised' activities would be appropriate for children aged nine, five, or even two years old.

Underlying motivations for change

Decisions to introduce English at primary level are often presented in terms of the future potential for the country to engage in international business, with a population fluent in English. Underlying this is an assumption that an earlier start will undoubtedly lead to increased proficiency. Parental pressure may also frequently be an influential factor in the decision-making process. However, there is often more than one motivation and these vary across countries. For example, South Africa views English as a tool for economic advancement, but the inclusion of English at primary level, as one of the 11 officially recognised languages, also supports the aim of promoting respect for all languages and enhancing communication across ethnic groups. In many parts of India, the compulsory introduction of English in the primary years is now seen as a way of ensuring equal opportunities for all. Japan – a country fiercely protective of its own identity, language and culture – views the introduction of English into the primary curriculum both as a tool for economic advancement globally and also a way of representing themselves to the world (Hashimoto 2007). Meanwhile, Kosovo, in a war-torn part of Europe, is in the process of positioning English from Grade 1 as offering a growing population new hope for a better future. With such varied and recent initiatives for the introduction of primary English it is unsurprising that contemporary responses to provision are wide-ranging.

The new provision and its impact on systems of education

Cummins & Davison (2007: xxiii) identify the following main features of the new provision:

‘Expansion and intensification of ELT by means of an earlier start, increased time allotment and experimentation with immersion and bilingual or trilingual

programs are evident both in private sector and public sector schools in many countries'.

Revealed here, are the huge implications for education systems in terms of material and human resources, adjustment to curriculum, timetable, classroom organization and other aspects of the system needed when English enters or starts earlier, as highlighted by Nunan (2003) and Hayes (2007).

Whilst English does appear to be what Butler (2009: 24) has described as “a high stake academic subject”, the realities of implementation vary widely today. For example, the ELLiE study (Enever 2008), a study of early introduction of foreign languages in seven European countries, indicates that whilst 45-90 minutes per week is allocated to English lessons in Grades 1 & 2, there was evidence in some school contexts of English being perceived as a lower priority, subject to early marginalisation when other priorities arose. Similarly, whilst in some countries primary English teachers were expected to have a language competency level of B1, according to the CEFR descriptors (Council of Europe, 2001), it was evident that quite a few remained in the A1-A2 categories, levels insufficient for engaging in the informal, interactive exchanges typical of the early primary languages classroom.

Policy regulation

In broad terms, approaches to policy regulation can be described as spanning a continuum from light touch regulation, often operating at devolved local levels, to a heavier, more centralised control. Examples such as Iceland, Indonesia and Netherlands can be identified as reflecting a light touch approach.

Taking Iceland as one illustration, a compulsory policy of English from Grade 4 was introduced in 2007, with an option for an earlier start devolved to school level. Currently, this has resulted in a 30% uptake from Grade 1-3 (Lefever 2007). Interestingly, no formal specialist training in teaching primary English is available at the compulsory level, presumably indicating a view that a trained generalist primary teacher will be fully equipped for this. A light touch encourages local initiative and experimentation and may facilitate a more nuanced response to local demands and conditions but often leads to a great deal of variation on the ground in terms of provision causing problems in transition to secondary school e.g. Indonesia.

A substantially more centralised approach to policy regulation has been adopted in such countries as China, S Korea, Taiwan and Italy, including elements such as a mandatory policy, detailed curriculum descriptors and teaching materials (sometimes with the provision of a course book). Italy, for example, introduced compulsory English from grade 1 in 2003, providing substantial national funding for in-service training and a requirement that all primary teachers of English should pass a language exam set at B1 level of the CEFR descriptors. An approved list of coursebooks is issued by the Ministry for schools to select from. Funding provision for student coursebooks is provided by the Ministry, via the regional authorities.

In summary, the plus points of stronger regulation include factors such as investment and resource provision, greater status given to PELT, opportunities to ensure a planned transition from primary to secondary and the potential for a generalised, equitable provision. However, the downside of a strong, centralised regulation system may include a lack of flexibility to respond appropriately to local conditions, the diminution of innovation and experimentation and increased potential for a high level of prescriptivism as a result of imposed curriculum and textbook provision.

Challenges

Challenges to policy formation and implementation are numerous and often interconnected. We highlight four below.

Political pressures and changes of leadership can affect stable policy formation and programme continuity as illustrated by the recent example of the reversal of the policy to teach Science and Maths, through English, at primary school in Malaysia after just 6 years of the English medium policy in operation (de Lotbinière 2009). The frustration and demoralization of stakeholders involved in implementing such a programme are also likely to be experienced when there is lack of planning and preparation before a new large scale programme implementation such as in the next example. The Bangladesh government made the decision to lower the starting age for English to Grade 1 in 1990, two years earlier than previously, without the necessary planning and proper baseline assessments to determine how teachers could be trained and materials prepared for the seven million new learners in Grades 1 and 2 (Hoque 2009). The consequences of the lack of planning seem apparent in the results of a baseline study carried by English in Action (2009), a project to

improve English in Bangladesh, which indicated that children make virtually no progress through 5 years of primary school in terms of English language development (EIA 2009).

Though there is acceptance of the need for adequately trained primary English teachers, a shortage of such teachers was widely reported in the Bangalore conference, clearly representing a threat to implementation. In many contexts, there is often a mismatch between the expected primary English curriculum outcomes (often framed in terms of ability to communicate) and the qualifications, professional skills and language proficiency of teachers available to teach English. The consequences of a large number of untrained or minimally trained primary English teachers are likely to impact on children's motivation, language learning, outcomes, and teachers' self confidence and self esteem.

Finally the impact of the private sector can be seen as a double edged sword (Enever & Moon 2009) as illustrated by the cases of Poland and Greece. In Poland, English was made compulsory at Grade 2 level from 2009 but during the 1990s parental demand for English at lower primary level was met by the private sector. Parents put pressure on schools to hire English teachers for extra-curricular lessons which they paid for. So the private system filled a temporary need which has now been largely satisfied by state provision. By contrast in Greece, most children apparently receive private English tuition from age 8, either at home or attending a private language school so there is a kind of dual system at work with the private sector having greater credibility in the eyes of children and parents. Under-investment in state provision over many years has failed to provide a satisfactory quality in ordinary primary classrooms (Giannikas, forthcoming). Hence, in Poland private teachers and private language schools appear to have served a useful interim solution, whilst in Greece they seem to have *become* the system.

Conditions

Growing empirical experience of early foreign language programmes has enabled researchers and educators to identify some of the conditions (Blondin et al 1998, Edelenbos al 2006, Johnstone 2009, Moon 2004, Nikolov 2000) which seem to be associated with successful primary English programmes though, of course, they do not guarantee success. They should be seen as working together rather than representing a possible set of options. The list of conditions below represents the

outcomes of an e.discussion involving a group of senior educators who presented at the Bangalore conference, several involved in policy formation and implementation in their own countries.

- Taking a long term view
- Planned & phased introduction with piloting
- Combined bottom up & top down approach
- Monitoring & evaluation studies
- Sufficient funding and institutional support
- Planning for transition phase
- Factors in achieving quality & sustainability:
 - Minimum teacher competency level (B1 CEFR)
 - Appropriate pedagogic skills for PELT
 - Age- appropriate & culturally appropriate materials
 - Regular support & on-going training/CPD for teachers
 - Realistic workloads

Key Issues

There are a number of issues which arise out of the trend towards early English but we identify three that need to be more widely debated.

Equity of access to English is now very much an issue in the field of primary English because of the increasing number of countries making English compulsory at primary level. While the policy offers potential access for all children, regardless of economic background and is potentially a democratising influence in countries like India where English was traditionally seen as an elite language (Graddol 2010), the reality is often an increased urban/rural divide as a result of the lack of primary English teacher availability and low proficiency levels plus often a lack of willingness to teach in rural areas. There is a similar divide in cities between schools catering for children from lower and higher socio economic classes. So a key dilemma for governments is how to ensure not just equal access to English for all children but quality of provision for all.

The trend towards early English around the world seems to have led to the creation of pedagogic norms. There are striking similarities in the curricular advice on approach and pedagogy in different parts of the world. For example: communicative,

child centred, use of authentic materials and the use of pair and group work. Such concepts are based predominantly on Western models, often inappropriate for some of the contexts where they will be implemented with cramped classrooms, large numbers of children, low resourced, and used by teachers, with very different norms of teaching. A key issue is that these new approaches and pedagogies are often adopted uncritically by local education officials, with a lack of concern for whether they are contextually appropriate and a lack of understanding of what they imply for classroom practice, resources and teacher's professional understanding.

A third issue is connected to the current model of communication which underpins many current versions of Communicative Language Teaching. At the early stages of learning English, in classrooms described as adopting a communicative approach, the mode is frequently whole class choral with songs and repetition drills and communication is one way from teacher to pupils. This cannot be accurately described as 'communicative'. This raises the question of whether we need a new term to describe early interaction in primary classrooms but perhaps raises the larger question of whether our current model of communication is an appropriate one for children acquiring a foreign, second or additional language. Children in both their L1 and L2 typically engage in imaginative or play talk, repetition of refrains e.g. What's the time Mr Wolf? which do not fit easily with the notion and characteristics of communication underpinning current notions of CLT. Perhaps we need a different model of child foreign language communication based on descriptions of emergent spoken language in typical EFL classroom conditions which more accurately reflects the realities of acquiring a language under classroom conditions.

Benefits but success not guaranteed

Finally, as Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek (2006: 147) so aptly highlight, an early start offers potential benefits by 'activating children's natural languages acquisition mechanisms and ensuring that more time for learning is available overall' but it does not of itself guarantee success and requires certain minimal conditions to be in place as highlighted above. Even with these in place, the venture is likely to be challenging and outcomes may be less than expected because, as Nikolov points out in her review of the research on the age factor, children develop more slowly than older students and adults and what children are expected to do as a result of ELL tends to be modest (2009: 26-27).

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