

Factors influencing success in teaching English in state primary schools

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1

Executive summary

The following recommendations for effective primary English language education within national education systems are derived from the research and documentation reviewed in this report. The recommendations are referenced to particular sections of the report, which readers may consult for further detail.

Recommendation 1

English language teaching in primary schools should be conducted by generalist primary class teachers with appropriate training in primary English language teaching methods (see Sections 5, 6 and 8).

Recommendation 2

These generalist teachers should have an English language level of at least B2, but preferably C1 on the CEFR (see Section 5).

Recommendation 3

An enabling condition for effective primary English language teaching is a pre-service teacher training system in which school teachers are required to have masters degrees (see Section 8).

Recommendation 4

Lifelong learning for teachers is at the heart of successful education systems; thus a school-focused system of continuing professional development should be developed which allows teachers adequate time to reflect on new information about teaching-learning and to incorporate it into existing knowledge structures, both by themselves and in collaboration with colleagues (see Section 9.2).

Recommendation 5

Once in schools, teachers should be respected, trusted and given the freedom to organise instruction according to the needs of their pupils within a guiding national framework (see Section 8).

Recommendation 6

Further to recommendation 5, teachers should demonstrate positive attitudes towards English. This in turn will influence children's motivation to learn, their enjoyment of their English classes and, ultimately, their achievement (see Section 5).

Recommendation 7

A curriculum that allows teachers and children opportunities to engage in meaningful language use, which also provides opportunities for considerable recycling of target language in new contexts and which is age-appropriate should be developed; theme-based teaching is strongly recommended (see Section 9.3).

Recommendation 8

A realistic English language proficiency target to set for children by the end of the primary cycle is A1–A2 on the CEFR (see Section 5).

Recommendation 9

Ideally, instructional time should be concentrated towards the end of the primary cycle rather than provided in smaller amounts over a longer time span, though it is recognised that this may be difficult to implement in practice (see Section 9.3).

Recommendation 10

Ideally, materials should be prepared by teachers to respond to the specific needs of their own classes; where materials are prepared by others, they should be founded on an understanding of how young children learn languages and provide stimulating, theme-based activities promoting genuine communicative language use (see Section 9.4).

Recommendation 11

To promote children's language learning, considerable out-of-school exposure to English in the local environment should be available, including through films and television programmes in English that are subtitled rather than dubbed into learners' L1 (see Sections 5, 6 and 8).

Recommendation 12

Underpinning recommendations 1–10, a prerequisite for effective primary English language instruction at the national level is an equitable education system in which socio-economic status is not linked to academic achievement (see Section 3).

Recommendation 13

Further to recommendation 12, private tuition in English should not be regarded as essential for academic success within the education system (see Section 7).

Recommendation 14

Allied to recommendation 13, high-stakes testing should not be seen as a means to promote English language competence across the education system (see Sections 7 and 8).

2

Introduction

This report discusses factors that have an impact on the quality of English as a foreign language education in primary schools in state education systems, and relates these to factors that have an impact on the quality of education in general. It begins at the general level by examining international comparisons of educational achievement, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures performance in literacy, maths and science, the English Proficiency Index and TOEFL country results for English, as a means to identify high-performing education systems (though recognising the limitations of each of these indicators). It then discusses international comparisons of English provision in primary schools, with a particular focus on the findings of the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) project. This is followed by three 'country focus' reports for the Netherlands, Korea¹ and Finland. The report then discusses a range of factors that are important in effective primary English language education and education more generally, viz. instructional time and intensity of instruction, teaching-learning materials, initial teacher training, in-service teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD) and the status of teachers within society. Finally, the conclusion presents a checklist of the factors that may contribute to successful primary English language teaching, while recognising that they require consideration within particular socio-political, cultural and educational contexts.

¹ The country is officially known as 'The Republic of Korea', and comprises the southern half of the Korean peninsula. In most of the literature it is referred to simply as 'Korea' and I shall follow this convention. The north of the peninsula, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, has little engagement with the outside world.

3

High-performing education systems

Governments are paying increasing attention to international comparisons as they search for effective policies that enhance individuals' social and economic prospects, provide incentives for greater efficiency in schooling, and help to mobilise resources to meet rising demands. (OECD, 2013d: 3)

International comparisons of student achievement have taken centre stage in policy debates about education in recent years, with the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) leading the way in the global 'accountability' movement. Though there are doubts about the validity and reliability of the tests and criticism of their cultural neutrality for failing to take account of the different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds of test-takers (Meyer and Benavot, 2013), success in the PISA rankings is coveted by governments. Indeed, there is much soul-searching when a country's rankings are not as high as hoped or, even worse, fall from one assessment period to the next, as happened to Finland in the 2012 tests. In response to the fall the Finnish Minister of Education declared: 'The general downturn in learning outcomes shows that we must take strong action to develop Finnish education.' (Finnbay, 3 December 2013)

PISA is designed to provide a general indicator of high-performing education systems in terms of student achievement at age 15 in mathematics, reading and science – but does not include assessments of proficiency in any foreign language in schools, nor is there any direct focus on primary education. However, to the extent that performance at the secondary education level is built upon the foundations of primary education and that first language literacy skills can aid in the learning of another language (Ellis, 2008), the results have sector-wide relevance. Other scholars (see, e.g. Kang, 2012 on Korea) also make reference to these results as a precursor to discussions of primary English education.

In the 2012 PISA rankings, the scores for the highest-performing countries for each subject area are shown in Tables 1 to 3 below (source: OECD, 2013e).

Table 1: Highest-performing countries in mathematics, PISA 2012

Rank	Country	Mathematics
1	Shanghai–China	613
2	Singapore	573
3	Hong Kong–China	561
4	Chinese Taipei	560
5	Korea	554
6	Macao–China	538
7	Japan	536
8	Liechtenstein	535
9	Switzerland	531
10	Netherlands	523

Table 2: Highest-performing countries in reading, PISA 2012

Rank	Country	Mathematics
1	Shanghai–China	570
2	Hong Kong–China	545
3	Singapore	542
4	Japan	538
5	Korea	536
6	Finland	524
7	Chinese Taipei	523
8	Canada	523
9	Ireland	523
10	Poland	518

Table 3: Highest-performing countries in science, PISA 2012

Rank	Country	Mathematics
1	Shanghai–China	580
2	Hong Kong–China	555
3	Singapore	551
4	Japan	547
5	Finland	545
6	Estonia	541
7	Korea	538
8	Poland	526
9	Canada	525
10	Germany	524

As can be seen, the tables are dominated by Asian countries, though China’s agreement with the OECD meant that it entered regions rather than the country as a whole in the 2012 tests. It is unlikely that the results for China will be maintained when the country as a whole is included in the 2015 PISA tests, given that Shanghai spends four times the national average on education and its economic success means that parents are able and willing to spend heavily on private tuition for their children (Mok et al., 2009). However, the fact that ‘higher expenditure is not necessarily associated with better outcomes or the quality of education’ (OECD, 2013d: 211) is writ large in the performance of the USA, which ranks 13 points below the OECD average in mathematics, four points below the average in science and only two points above it in reading, despite leading the world in spending US\$15,171 per student per year on education (primary through to tertiary), far higher than the OECD average of US\$9,313. The figure for primary education specifically is US\$11,193; again, well above the OECD average of US\$ 7,974 per student per year (OECD, 2013d: 174). The OECD notes that ‘beyond a certain level of expenditure per student, excellence in education requires more than money; how resources are allocated is just as important as the amount of resources available’ (*ibid.*: 24)

A key outcome for national education systems is, of course, not just performance on international tests such as PISA but the extent to which the system meets the needs of all of its students. In this respect, excluding areas of China from consideration, the PISA results for other countries including Canada, Estonia, Finland, Japan, Korea and the Netherlands show ‘high average performance and equity are not mutually

exclusive’ (OECD, 2013e: 14) with ‘above-OECD-average mean performance and a weak relationship between socio-economic status and student performance’. (*ibid.*: 14) Essentially, what this means is that it is not only the children of the financially better-off who score well on the tests. This is important as it indicates that there seems to be a direct link between educational quality and educational *equality*.

With specific reference to assessment of English language levels in particular countries, international rankings are provided by organisations such as English First (EF), a private educational company which uses data from 750,000 takers of its own tests in 60 countries to compile an *English Proficiency Index* annually. In the 2013 index the countries listed as having ‘very high proficiency’ were (in descending order) Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands, Estonia, Denmark, Austria and Finland. In accounting for this, it is interesting that the EF report notes: ‘The seven countries with the strongest English are all small European nations, whose size compels them to adopt an international outlook,’ (EF, 2013: 5) suggesting that success in English correlates strongly with small size and internationalisation. A number of countries that scored highly in PISA, such as Hong Kong SAR-China and Korea, were only recorded as having ‘moderate proficiency’ and ranked 22 and 24 respectively out of the 60 countries (EF, 2013: 6). Korea is in the ‘country spotlights’ in the 2013 EF report as its scores have dropped slightly between 2007 and 2012, despite massive national investment in English language education. The prevailing teaching paradigm in Korea is singled out for blame: ‘Few are optimistic about any significant improvements, given a traditional system that forces students to drill and memorize’. (EF, 2013: 19) It must be remembered that, as the EF test data is based on adults, what cannot be determined from these results is whether language teaching policy and practice in primary schools has any impact on proficiency levels – is an early start necessarily needed for proficiency later in life?

Another measure of English language proficiency is to be found in the scores of candidates on the TOEFL series of tests. In the aggregated results for 2012 (ETS, 2013) the top five highest-scoring countries are the Netherlands, Austria, Singapore, Belgium and Denmark. Again, these results are for learners who need an international language test score, usually to enable them to study at the tertiary level or to work in English-speaking countries, and are not designed for primary-age learners. Further, the test creators specifically caution against the results being used for ranking countries:

ETS, creator of the TOEFL test, does not endorse the practice of ranking countries on the basis of TOEFL scores, as this is a misuse of data. [original emphasis] *The TOEFL test provides accurate scores at the individual level; it is not appropriate for comparing countries. The differences in the number of students taking the test in each country, how early English is introduced into the curriculum, how many hours per week are devoted to learning English, and the fact that those taking the test are not representative of all English speakers in each country or any defined population make ranking by test score meaningless.* (ETS, 2013: 6)

Their caveats notwithstanding, countries continue to use the scores to rank their national performance against others, particularly their neighbours, and bemoan poor scores when these occur (see, e.g. Khaopa, 2013). This misuse of test data is hardly surprising when the link between proficiency in English and increased economic competitiveness for countries and individuals is regularly made (EF, 2013; Ramaswami et al., 2012) and when TOEFL scores are included as the criteria for English proficiency in the World Competitiveness Yearbook alongside PISA results for assessment of general educational quality (IMD, 2013).

The backdrop of a global concern for strengthening national education systems so that they may compete more effectively in international tests such as PISA, allied to a belief that proficiency in English is essential for competitiveness in the globalised economy, provides the foundation for the remainder of this report. Though neither PISA nor English-specific international comparisons have any direct link to English teaching at the primary level, they are a means to identifying high-performing education systems, which may prove fruitful in establishing basic conditions for the effective teaching of English at the primary level. However, one factor not explored either in the PISA or EF data is the teacher – a crucial variable in any education system, and for any subject taught.

4

International comparisons of English provision in primary schools

International comparisons of English language teaching-learning and proficiency outcomes at the school level are generally absent from the research literature. A 1995 study by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) had originally intended to assess student achievement but was cancelled after its Phase 1 data collection on the policy context due to lack of funding (see Dickson and Cumming, 1996, for details of Phase 1). However, in response to the growing importance of English for economic globalisation, IEA has just launched a new comparative study focusing specifically on English in the participating countries, though the target population is Grade 10 students, and reports will not be available until 2018–19 (IEA, 2014).

Earlier research (Gika, 1997) compared primary foreign language teaching across Italy, Spain, England and Greece, noting the hegemony of English (which also led to the failure to focus on other languages in England), but did not report on language outcomes for students, though teachers' concern with their own language levels was noted. Other previous research (Martin, 2000) also focused on foreign language teaching across Europe with a view to improving provision in the UK, but again did not assess language proficiency. Instead, general conclusions were made about the ability of children to learn languages under certain conditions, which have relevance for effective primary English teaching, viz. that:

*... children of **primary age can effectively learn** [original emphasis] aspects of a foreign language; that the teaching approaches must be appropriate to their age group; that continuity of foreign language into the secondary school is important and that the quality of the teaching must be high.* (Martin, 2000: 67)

Lack of information on English language outcomes is surprising, given the importance attached to increasing English language skills by national governments, who would be expected to be concerned about the return on their investment in education, and particularly so in light of the trend towards lowering the age at which English is taught

in schools. This trend towards ever-earlier introduction of English can be clearly seen in Rixon's (2013) international survey of policy and practice in primary English teaching, which noted that one-third of countries had lowered the starting age since the first iteration of the survey some ten years previously, with 30 of the 64 countries surveyed now teaching English from Grade 1 (Rixon, 2013).

Some cross-national comparative research has focused on limited aspects of classroom behaviour, such as in Abd-Kadir and Hardman's (2007) study of pupil participation and engagement in Kenyan and Nigerian primary English classes, where English is the medium of instruction; or on related teacher factors as in Butler's (2004) study of self-perceptions of actual and desired English proficiency levels that primary school teachers have in Korea, Taiwan and Japan. This research has important outcomes that may be of relevance to other countries, such as the need to 'focus on the school as the best level of intervention for improving the quality of teaching and learning,' (Abd-Kadir and Hardman, 2007: 12) and the necessity 'to identify what kinds and levels of English proficiency elementary school teachers need to teach English' as well as 'to better understand what types of competencies (regarding both knowledge and the ability to use such knowledge) elementary school EFL teachers must have'. (Butler, 2004: 269)

Other comparative research has focused on the impact of language policy and planning, notably Nunan (2003) and Baldauf et al. (2011), both within the Asia-Pacific region, while Kaplan et al. (2011) discuss general reasons for the failure of policy decisions to introduce English at the primary level. Kaplan et al. (2011: 106) note two major 'urban legends', which require analysis with respect to English teaching, viz.:

People in many polities have come to believe that their children would be guaranteed better economic opportunities if they had English as part of their linguistic repertoire. This belief has supported the addition of English to the school curriculum – initially at the secondary school level and then at the intermediate school level. A decade or more of experimentation demonstrated that

English at intermediate school was not sufficient to develop proficiency, so another legend – that early introduction to English would be the panacea – spurred an international belief that English language education should begin at the first grade, or even better in kindergarten.

They assert that these legends have two inherent fallacies, that (*ibid.*: 106):

- *being English-knowing is not a guarantee of an improvement in economic opportunity*
- *early English learning is not a guarantee of near-native English proficiency.*

The fallacies underlie policy changes in the countries reviewed by Nunan (2003) – China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Malaysia and Taiwan. Nunan came to the conclusion that the accelerating trend towards earlier English language instruction in the region was ill-considered and having no positive effect.

The single most pervasive outcome of this study is 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. (Nunan, 2003: 609)

Nunan also noted that the decision to introduce English at the primary level was largely political and based on folk wisdom that ‘the younger the better’ was axiomatic in language learning, irrespective of the context of learning. Other problems noted were ‘inequity regarding access to effective language instruction, inadequately trained and skilled teachers, and a disjunction between curriculum rhetoric and pedagogical reality,’ (Nunan, 2003: 589) all of which lead to the conclusion that governments wishing to introduce English into the primary curriculum need first of all to establish pre-conditions for success by tackling the problems Nunan has identified.

Eight years later the review by Baldauf et al. (2011) revealed little different in a wider range of countries – Bangladesh, China, Japan, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Taiwan, Timor-Leste and Vietnam – with the exception of Singapore, where English was increasingly being used as a first language in many households and was displacing local first languages, Mandarin and Tamil. (As English has official status in Singapore, its experience is radically different from

countries where English is a foreign language and is thus deemed not relevant to this report.) The trend towards the early introduction of English had:

... intensified under the pressure of economic competition ... despite the fact that such teaching requires massive commitments of funds (i.e. resourcing policy), special early childhood teacher training, teachers with excellent language skills (i.e. personnel policy), and books and materials (i.e. curriculum, materials and methods policy). (Baldauf et al., 2011: 310)

The challenges of inequitable access to effective English language teaching, poorly trained teachers with limited language skills and officially mandated curricula that did not match with actual classroom practice, or were impossible to implement in the classroom conditions, were all reiterated in this review and are illustrative of many of the ‘12 reasons for educational language plans sometimes failing’ discussed in Kaplan et al. (2011) and collated in Table 4.

Table 4: Reasons for the failure of educational language plans

1	The time dedicated to language learning is inadequate.
2	Indigenous teacher training is not appropriate or effective.
3	Native speakers cannot fill the proficiency and availability gap.
4	Educational materials may not be sufficient or appropriate.
5	Methodology may not be appropriate to desired outcomes.
6	Resources may not be adequate for student population needs.
7	Continuity of commitment may be problematic.
8	Language norms may be a problem.
9	International assistance programmes may not be useful.
10	Primary school children may not be prepared for early language learning.
11	Instruction may not actually meet community and/or national objectives.
12	Language endangerment may increase.

These 12 causes for failure may be reformulated as pre-conditions for success in the implementation of English in primary schools, as in Table 5.

Table 5: Pre-conditions for success in the implementation of educational language plans

1	The time dedicated to language learning must be adequate.
2	Indigenous teacher training must be appropriate and effective.
3	Native speakers should not be used to fill the proficiency and availability gap.
4	Educational materials must be sufficient and appropriate.
5	Methodology should be appropriate to desired outcomes.
6	Resources must be adequate for student population needs.
7	Continuity of commitment should be ensured.
8	Language norms should not be a problem.
9	International assistance programmes, if present, should be useful.
10	Primary school children must be prepared for early language learning.
11	Instruction should meet community and/or national objectives.
12	Language endangerment should not be increased.

The necessity of establishing pre-conditions such as these when introducing English into primary schools, or lowering the starting point to earlier primary grades, is widely acknowledged by educational researchers. Hayes (2012b: 51–52) presented a similar list of factors that needed to be taken into account when discussing this kind of educational innovation, based on his work on primary English provision in Vietnam:

Changes are, however, not just necessary in the new grade levels in which English is introduced but throughout the entire system as earlier introduction of a subject inevitably requires adjustment to the curriculum and materials in all subsequent grades. The follow-on implications of a decision to teach English earlier in the school cycle are profound ... all manner of other factors come into play which are common to systemic educational reform for any subject area in the curriculum. These are, primarily:

- *ensuring that there are adequate numbers of teachers to teach the subject to the particular grades*
- *ensuring that these teachers are well trained for the task*
- *ensuring that instructional time is available in the curriculum for the teaching of the subject*

- *ensuring that curriculum materials and teaching-learning approaches are appropriate to the age group*
- *ensuring that adequate time has been allowed for the preparation of new curriculum materials*
- *ensuring that appropriate and timely in-service training is given to teachers in the use of the materials and teaching-learning approaches*
- *ensuring that adequate in-school advisory support is available to teachers as they implement the curriculum*
- *ensuring that appropriate evaluation procedures are in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the innovation*
- *ensuring that adequate material and financial resources are available to implement all of the above*
- *and, of course, ensuring that necessary adjustments are made to the curriculum and materials for all subsequent grades, and that teachers are given training to introduce them to these changes in the higher grades.*

Elsewhere, Duff notes that a number of variables related to the child learner, classroom organisation of teaching and the school curriculum are essential variables to take into account when considering earlier English instruction:

[T]he age at which FL learning commences and the intensity, duration, and quality of FL instruction, the status of the FL course itself within the school curriculum, and students' metalinguistic efficiency are all variables that must be taken into account when changing policies of this nature and evaluating the effectiveness of earlier FL instruction.
(Duff, 2008: 8)

Nevertheless, despite all of these policy prescriptions and analyses listing various factors to take into account for success in primary English teaching, it seems that decisions to introduce or lower the starting age for the teaching of English remain remarkably immune to research evidence and are primarily political rather than educational (Baldauf et al., 2011). Even more troubling, given the fact that teaching English in primary schools is predicated on the belief (or fallacy) that it will lead to enhanced proficiency, is that there remains a paucity of research focusing on students' *English language outcomes* at the end of primary schooling.

Of the few studies that measured language proficiency, the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) project, as its name implies, dealt with a very restricted context in Spain and focused primarily on determining the impact of age of onset of learning on attainment. The results of this study indicated that there was no advantage to an early start to learning English but that, in contrast, older learners (starting at age 14) progressed faster than younger learners (whether starting at age eight or 11) and younger learners did not catch up over the six-year time span of the project (Muñoz, 2009). The conclusion drawn was that 'second language learning success in a foreign language context may be as much a function of exposure as of age,' (*ibid.*: 34) reinforcing the notion that an earlier starting age as a panacea for English language learning in school contexts is indeed a fallacy (Kaplan et al., 2011).

A later study, the Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) project, remains one of the few major *transnational* research undertakings to include measurement of students' language proficiency at the primary level among its research goals. This project is discussed in the next section.

5

The Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) project

The final report of the ELLiE project (Enever, 2011a: 6) states that it was designed specifically:

To explore contexts for foreign/second language learning in state-funded primary schools in Europe with the aim of clarifying what can realistically be achieved in classroom contexts where relatively limited amounts of curriculum time are available for language learning (as is commonly found across Europe).

ELLiE was unusual in that it was both transnational and longitudinal in scope. The project began in 2006 with a one-year scoping study, with the main study running from December 2007 to November 2010. It involved research in seven countries – England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Sweden and Croatia – with 1,400 students and their teachers in 48 schools, six to eight in each participating country. The sampling of schools was based on convenience of access for the researchers, rather than randomised to ensure that there was no bias in the sample selected, which detracts somewhat from the generalisability of the results, even though they attempted to control for variables such as socio-economic background and geographical location – urban, semi-urban and rural. As would be expected, over the lifetime of the project the research gave rise to a number of presentations and publications, both country-specific (e.g. Mihaljević Djigunović, 2013, which focuses on Croatia) and thematic (e.g. Szpotowicz, Mihaljević Djigunović and Enever, 2009, which explores learning environments and motivation among young learners). In this section I shall draw on the final report (Enever, 2011a) and an edited collection of chapters (Enever, 2011b), as these provide details of all key findings. Where appropriate, I shall make occasional reference to other supporting literature.

Since the rationale for teaching English in primary schools is based on putative enhanced proficiency from starting earlier, it is interesting to examine the language outcomes for children involved in the ELLiE project. The broad characterisation of outcomes in the Executive Summary of the final report is somewhat vague, as follows:

Language achievements:

- *Outcomes are moderate at this stage*
- *The range of outcomes varies substantially across countries*
- *Higher levels are achieved by learners of English, particularly where English is used more widely in social contexts*
- *Speaking skills develop only gradually under conditions of limited curriculum time*
- *By the fourth year of learning, most children are able to read short comic strip stories*
- *As children develop a larger vocabulary, they begin to syntactically complexify their language.* (Enever, 2011a: 3)

Participating countries use the level descriptors in the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, n.d.) as targets for language outcomes in the primary cycle, in spite of the fact that these were not developed for use with young learners but ‘were formulated drawing from a corpus of adult language use, failing to capture the essential features of children’s early foreign language (FL) learning experiences’. (Enever, 2011a: 9) Though the ELLiE report concludes that CEFR level descriptors are inappropriate, they remain in use and of necessity influenced the project’s language assessment instruments, which were based on the ‘can do’ statements developed by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE, n.d.) for each CEFR level.

The actual CEFR targets set by each of the participating countries are given in Table 6.

Table 6: Intended language outcomes for primary children in ELLiE countries

Country	CEFR target/age
England	A1 by 11 years
Croatia	A1 by ten/11 years
Italy	A1+ by 11 years
Netherlands	A2 by 12 years
Poland	A1 by 11 years
Spain	A1 by 12 years
Sweden	A1 by nine years; A2.1 by 12 years

Within the CEFR, the descriptors for levels A1 and A2 on the 'global scale' are as follows (Council of Europe, n.d.):

Table 7: CEFR descriptors for A1 and A2 levels

Basic user	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

Both A1 and A2 on the CEFR levels are characterised as 'basic user'. In terms of these levels, Enever assesses language outcomes among participating learners as follows:

The average ELLiE learners have approached A1 level (as described by the CEFR) in their oral and aural skills during the first four years of instruction. (2011b: 7)

Language outcomes in the ELLiE countries are indeed 'moderate' after four years of primary school though there is some variation across the participating countries, which is attributed to a complex range of factors by Szpotowicz and Lindgren:

[T]he variation in listening and reading results can be attributed to many factors, such as motivation, the teacher, the school, parents and exposure to the foreign language. In contexts where children are exposed to English on a daily basis, in addition to the national language, this provides a strong foundation for FL development in the school context. In those country contexts where English is not particularly present in daily life alongside the national language, or where another FL is being learnt, then language development is slower. (Szpotowicz and Lindgren, 2011: 141)

In Mihaljević Djigunović's (2013) case study of Croatia, there is also an interesting (and amusing) aside on pronunciation of the foreign language among young children, an area where there is most evidence that starting young is an advantage for a 'native-like' accent (Singleton and Ryan, 2004).

One teacher pointed out difficulties in pronunciation: 'Pronunciation is a bit difficult because most first graders are missing front teeth. This problem is usually solved by speaking in chorus.' (Mihaljević Djigunović, 2013: 167)

Instruction is organised in a variety of ways in different countries (see Table 8, below, which excludes England as the foreign language taught there is not of concern in this report).

Table 8: Organisation of instructional hours in primary schools (Enever, 2011d: 32)

Country	Typical number of lessons per week	Lesson duration
Italy	Year 1 – one lesson; Year 2 – two lessons; Years 3–5 – three lessons per week	Recommendation of 60 minutes per week but may vary at individual schools
Netherlands	No specified number Typically one to three lessons per week	Typically Years 1–2 – 20 minutes; Years 3–8 – 30–60 minutes
Poland	Two	45 mins
Spain	No specified number; may be anything from one to four lessons per week	Typically 45–60 minutes
Sweden	Years 1–3 – one lesson Year 4 – two lessons	20–30 minutes 40 minutes
Croatia	Two	45 minutes

There is little difference in the intensity of instruction, with the 'drip feed' approach (a little instruction on a frequent basis) prevailing. What is noticeable is that, with the typical number of lessons per week, children take as much instructional time to reach A1 level as is often expected to reach A2. For example, in Croatia, two x 45-minute lessons for 35 weeks per year over four years results in 210 instructional hours; whereas most publishers and English teaching websites give figures of around 180 to 200 instructional hours to reach A2 (see e.g. www.englishclub.com/esl-exams/levels-cef.htm). Of course, learning is not simply a response to the number of hours spent in a classroom and other variables must be taken into account such as out-of-class exposure to English, the context of learning, learning purpose, and so on.

Across the ELLiE countries the recommended English language teaching-learning method is broadly an 'age-appropriate communicative approach'. However, there is divergence between policy and practice in this respect, which, as elsewhere, may be due to different understandings of the communicative approach (see, e.g. Butler, 2005; Manghubai et al., 2004). This divergence may not be significant. Tragant and Lundgren (2011: 9) note 'the mix of teaching approaches found in the case studies, with classes where rather communicative playful practices were implemented and those where quite traditional practices were observed,' but go on to say that:

In spite of the variation, a few commonalities seem to emerge from the case studies. A number of teachers were fond of the FL they taught, enjoyed teaching it and/or believed in the benefits of teaching a FL at this age. Importantly, some teachers were good at creating a positive and safe relationship with the children, at being supportive towards them or at making sure they had successful experiences at these early stages of L2 learning. There were also a number of teachers who were especially good at keeping the students focused and on-task. (Tragant and Lundgren, 2011: 99)

Thus, what seem to be important are the teachers' confidence and enjoyment in their classes, a positive classroom environment with good teacher-student rapport and a concern for all children in the class to have a successful language learning experience. These factors operate irrespective of particular methods employed.

When teachers enjoy teaching, children are motivated to learn and experience similar enjoyment in their English classes. The research indicated that, almost universally, children begin language learning with high motivation and positive attitudes but that differences emerged over the lifespan of the project.

The differences were attributed to cumulative experience of learning in the primary school in general and the associated development of learning preferences as the children matured cognitively. Children also expressed preferences for traditional classroom arrangements with the teacher at the front of the class and the students all facing her/him. This seemed to be connected to their desire for order and structure, and knowing their place in a particular social world, something which has also been found to be important for children in L1 acquisition (Mitchell et al., 2013). Children particularly disliked the disruptive behaviour of other children where this occurred and clearly identified its negative impact on learning. Mihaljević Djigunović and Lopriore (2011: 49–50) comment that children associate learning 'with an experience that requires concentration and order ... viewing it as a process that relies upon the teacher's input as well as the joint effort of both the teacher and the learners.' In the ELLiE study it is interesting that the children who performed best at the start of the project were those who liked the traditional classroom arrangement, but by the end the best performers were those who preferred working in groups, suggesting that, with increasing cognitive maturity, high achievers were aware of the opportunities for language practice that this format offered.

Research elsewhere confirms that 'even primary school learners consciously perceive their learning process and hold varied beliefs about the nature of language learning' (Kolb, 2007: 238) In her study of primary EFL classes in Germany Kolb found that if the teacher explained the reason for doing particular activities, children's attitudes towards the activity changed:

In this study most of the learners did not consider the activity playing games to be very important for their learning. As a consequence the teacher talked about the value of the challenges of playing games. The students became aware of all the language work the activity playing games included and rated the activity higher than before. If students know why they do what they do, this will also increase their task involvement. (ibid.: 238)

This kind of explanation may be particularly important where language learning activities contrast with the ways in which other areas of the primary curriculum are taught (Brewster and Ellis, 2002). It also reinforces the ELLiE conclusion that the role of the teacher in motivating learners remains 'paramount in the first years of FLL (foreign language learning).' (Mihaljević Djigunović and Lopriore, 2011: 58)

In four of the seven countries, publishers' textbooks were used, with the three other countries reliant on locally designed materials integrated with the general primary curriculum. The difference was attributed to the greater visibility of international publishers in the wider EFL market for older learners in those countries where textbooks were widely used – Croatia, Italy, Poland and Spain. Increasingly, multimedia materials are being developed and introduced at the primary level, though the ELLiE research noted that publishers were being slow to respond to the needs of the primary classroom in terms of 'supplementary materials' such as posters, puppets and picture cards. This deficiency may provide the stimulus for teachers to use their own creativity, an area in which well-trained primary teachers are usually strong, though materials preparation does place considerable demands on a teacher's time. There was no indication that the use/non-use of pre-packaged textbooks had any impact on learning outcomes.

Throughout the ELLiE literature one factor repeatedly having an important impact on learning outcomes is exposure to English outside school, particularly subtitled television and films. With subtitles, children become more actively involved in decoding the language, as Muñoz and Lindgren (2011: 118) comment:

The processes involved in watching a subtitled movie are complex. The FL is processed with support from the pictures at the same time as the corresponding L1 is read on the subtitles. Thus, what may seem a passive activity is really a cognitively complex and highly active process. (d'Ydewalle and De Bruycker, 2007)

Where foreign television and films are dubbed, children do not have this exposure and are at a comparative disadvantage. However, other studies cited in the ELLiE reports indicate that skilled teachers may be able to overcome the lack of exposure to the language outside class by providing additional input in school (Alcañiz and Muñoz, 2011; Tragant and Muñoz, 2009; cited in Muñoz and Lindgren, 2011). Clearly, the demands on teachers in this respect would be considerable.

With respect to the teachers and their qualifications, this varied across countries though there was also a gap between policy and practice identified in some areas due to the rapid expansion of primary English teaching. In most countries the favoured model for an English teacher was a generalist primary teacher trained in language teaching and with good language skills. The language levels that teachers of English were required to have, where they were specified, ranged from B1 to B2 on the CEFR. Enever (2011d: 26)

notes that: 'Observation evidence from the ELLiE study indicates that a minimum entry level of B1 is needed, with a desirable level of C1 for a teacher to be fully functional in the informal and incidental language regularly required in the primary classroom.' Initial teacher training to provide generalist primary teachers with the required language and pedagogic skills was not universal, though Croatia, Italy, Poland and Spain were strong in this respect. Lack of appropriate pre-service training is compensated for by in-service training provision, with regular programmes of courses on language development for teachers as well as age-appropriate language teaching skills. However, only in Croatia was in-service provision said by teachers to be adequate (and it was also compulsory), while in Poland, Spain and Sweden it was reported to be insufficient. In Italy and the Netherlands course provision was sufficient but attendance was voluntary.

Finally, findings from the ELLiE research project underlined the complexity of factors at play in successful language learning, encompassing effective initial and in-service teacher training, adequate and appropriate resources, enjoyable class experiences and school conditions conducive to learning the language. Though out-of-school contact with English was important it was not the sole criterion for success. Enever (2011c: 148) concluded that irrespective of out-of-class exposure 'it was possible to identify good levels of achievement by children in a number of schools within each region, with well-trained teachers, good resources, lively engaged classes and school environments conducive to FLL.' These factors are replicable elsewhere but are dependent on effective planning, adequate resourcing and sustained commitment.

I shall now examine primary English education in three countries to assess the extent to which these factors operate and whether or not they may be associated with success in those contexts.

6

Country focus 1: The Netherlands

As we have seen, the Netherlands scores highly on the EF *English Proficiency Index* and, indeed, there is a widespread perception that the Dutch are ‘good at learning English’. (Law, 2007) It is interesting that the link between achievement and out-of-school exposure through subtitled television and films that the ELLiE research project identified was previously noted more subjectively by Law for the Netherlands and other Scandinavian countries: ‘In the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, where proficiency in English is very high, English-language television programmes are subtitled. In Germany, Spain and France, where fewer people speak English well, the television programmes are dubbed’. (*ibid.*) Out-of-school exposure, of course, interacts with other features of the system to bring about successful learning and does not lessen the need for effective teaching in schools.

The basic features of English instruction in the Dutch primary curriculum are summarised in the table below (collated from Enever, 2011b, unless otherwise specified).

Table 9: Basic features of English instruction in the Netherlands

Formal school starting age	Five years; though many children start at age four
Status of English in the curriculum	Part of the core curriculum www.government.nl/issues/education/primary-education
Age at which English instruction starts	Optional from age four to nine; many schools start in Year 1 A foreign language is compulsory from the age of ten; most schools choose English
Organisation of instruction	Left to individual schools; only total number of hours specified for the first eight years of schooling; typically one to three lessons per week; Years 1–2 – 20 minutes; Years 3–8 – 30–60 minutes
Achievement level objective	Between A1–A2 on the CEFR scale by the age of 12
Teaching methods	Not mandated; schools free to choose (Source: <i>Eurypedia, European Encyclopedia on National Education Systems</i>)

Teaching-learning materials	Schools free to choose; coursebooks not generally used for six to ten year olds; materials/resources available for download; all schools have interactive whiteboards
Type of teacher	Generalist primary teacher with language teaching skills
Teacher qualifications	Primary teaching with English language component
Teacher English language level required	B2 on the CEFR scale required for entry to teacher education courses
In-service provision	Widespread; attendance voluntary

Though the age for children to begin learning a foreign language (not necessarily English) is set at age ten, most schools in the Netherlands now introduce English as the first foreign language in Year 1. Schools have a great deal of autonomy in how they organise English instruction and only the number of hours of instruction that learners must receive by the time they exit Year/Grade 8 is stipulated. However, attainment targets of between A1 and A2 on the CEFR scale by the age of 12 are specified centrally; it is up to individual schools how they achieve these. Similarly, teaching methods and use of particular materials are not specified but left to the discretion of the school.

Dutch performance on international tests such as PISA is strong, with a high degree of equality – there are few students who perform poorly. Equality is a major strength of the system. The Dutch School Inspectorate (2013) reports, for example, that 97 per cent of all the 6,807 primary schools reach the basic quality standards and that 83 per cent of the 100,200 teachers are proficient in all the basic skills. This is a notable achievement and one which many countries would be proud of. Nevertheless, despite this overall quality, the system is not resting on its laurels. The Dutch School Inspectorate has, for example, voiced concerns about the number of high-achievers in the education system. The 2011–12 Education Report, *The State of Education in the Netherlands*, highlighted the fact that ‘the number of pupils in primary education with a score higher than 548 in the Final Test in Primary Education has decreased from 5.4 per cent to 4.9 per cent in the

last two years'. (The Dutch School Inspectorate, 2013: 13) The inspectorate report is indicative of a concern that 'there needs to be more effective differentiation to cater for the varying needs of students and groups of students,' (*ibid.*: 8) alongside, *inter alia*, improved pastoral care, more results-oriented teaching and improved quality assurance given that: 'At the primary schools that score better in these areas, this is also reflected in better pupil performance'. (*ibid.*: 8)

A desire for continuous improvement – perhaps even a fear of moving backwards – is a hallmark of a high-achieving education system according to the McKinsey education reports (Mourshed et al., 2010), which also note that shaping the teaching profession so that its requirements and practices parallel those in professions such as law and medicine is also important. In this vein and perhaps in response to the declining intake in teacher training colleges for primary education in recent years (The Dutch School Inspectorate, 2013), the Dutch government has set out its plans for quality improvement in *Teaching 2020: a strong profession!* (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2011) with a number of recommendations designed 'to make the teaching profession more attractive, not only in terms of salary and career earnings potential, but in terms of the quality and status of the profession'. (*ibid.*: 18) These were reiterated in a policy document *Working in education 2012* (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2012), which included a proposal to increase teachers' level of education, with a master's degree the target for teachers by 2020. Interestingly, the document draws attention to the experience of the two other countries focused on here, Finland and Korea, noting that: 'All teachers in Finland are university graduates, including teachers in primary education. In other high-performing countries, such as Korea and Singapore, only the very best students are admitted to teacher training programmes after a demanding selection procedure'. (*ibid.*: 17) To raise the level of education to a master's degree will provide a challenge for the primary education sector as, at present, while 87 per cent of teachers have a degree only six per cent have a master's degree. It is notable that there are no recommendations specific to English teaching in the primary sector (though there are for secondary English teaching), indicating that it has no special status as a subject and primary teaching is considered as a whole.

How the Dutch government will work to see the status of teachers raised is not explicitly tackled, though it is safe to assume that an increase in qualifications will play a part. Though salary levels are mentioned, current financial conditions in the Netherlands, as elsewhere in Europe, mean that the government did not finance increases in salaries in either 2010 or 2011. Currently, the ratio of primary teachers' salaries to the earnings of other full-time workers with tertiary education is 0.70, significantly below an OECD average of 0.82 (OECD, 2013c). At present the status of teachers is on a par with that of social work rather than law or medicine, which the Kinsey reports indicate is desirable for the best education systems. However, according to the *2013 Global Teacher Status Index* (Dolton and Marcenaro-Gutierrez, 2013), which measures respect for teachers and their social standing, teachers in the Netherlands rank eighth on the index, the second highest of the European countries (behind Greece in second place), above Finland (13th) but below Korea in fourth place.

To conclude, the education system in the Netherlands produces learners with generally high achievement levels and there is a corresponding equality across learners, with few performing poorly. Some weaknesses have been identified in the system in terms of differentiation, which the government is currently addressing. Success in primary English teaching seems to be attributable as much to general education factors as it is to anything specific to the teaching of English. Indeed, it is only in access to English in out-of-school contexts that the Netherlands appears to have an edge that is specific to the language.

7

Country focus 2: Korea

'The driving force behind the astounding growth of Korea is education,' as the Korea Educational Development Institute proclaims on its website (<http://eng.kedi.re.kr>). Korea has been a remarkable success story in education over the last few decades, achieving a 99 per cent literacy rate and high enrolment rates in higher education: 50 per cent of the 18–21 age group is enrolled in four-year degree programmes (Kang, 2012). Performance on international tests such as PISA is, as we have seen, routinely high in all areas. English is seen as an essential component of educational success to the extent that: 'Koreans spend an average of 20,000 hours between primary school and university learning English, including both school instruction and private tutoring'. (EF, 2013: 18) In 2005 Koreans spent 15 billion dollars on private tuition in English (Song, 2011), a figure that can only have increased since then, given that the private school ('hagwon') industry had an annualised growth rate of 20.5 per cent between 2005 and 2009 (Kim, 2013). Song (2011: 36) notes that: 'South Korea's pursuit of English is probably unparalleled elsewhere in the world'. This is set within a context of intense commitment to education as a whole. Indeed, education is often described as a 'national obsession', an obsession which results in children spending most of their time at school of one kind or another. Song observes that:

South Korean parents are completely blasé about forcing their children to spend the bulk of their waking hours studying school subjects in order to be accepted into one of the best universities in the country. South Korean students typically leave home before 8am or even earlier and return home well past midnight, with normal and supplementary school work, and private after-school instruction all packed in between. (Song, 2011: 45)

A recent BBC report of a Korean child talking about her daily routine illustrates this schedule, which she believes is necessary for her to fulfil her dream of becoming an elementary school teacher (see www.bbc.com/news/education-25187993). Recently, the negative impact of the national 'zeal for education' has begun to be recognised in official publications such as a presentation developed by the Korea Institute for Educational Development on 'Education in Korea 2011', which commented that it has 'resulted in such a highly competitive environment, which often results in longest school work hours, unhappy

school life, and high expenditure for private tutoring'. (source: <http://eng.kedi.re.kr/khome/eng/education/generallInfo.do#>) Household expenditure on private tutoring for both primary and secondary sectors in 2005 was 2.9 per cent of GDP, very close to the 3.4 per cent of GDP in public expenditure on formal schooling, a massive private commitment (Kim, 2005). There are indications that the emphasis on private tuition for English is having negative effects on children's motivation. In a recent study of 6th Grade pupils in Seoul, 65 per cent of the children had negative attitudes towards the language, characterising English as 'something that takes my freedom away,' 'prison for life,' 'something that should never exist,' and even simply 'hell'. (Moon, 2013) These attitudes should be a cause of serious concern for education officials if they are widely replicated.

Despite massive investment in education, there is a widespread consensus that English outcomes do not match the inputs and that the return on investment is meagre. As we have seen from the *English Proficiency Index* (EF, 2013), Korea ranks as a country with only 'moderate' proficiency and scores actually declined from the previous year. This has led to much soul-searching nationally with solutions for improvement ranging from making English an official language (in spite of the fact that Korea is essentially a monolingual nation where the correlation between Korean nationals and speakers of Korean is almost 100 per cent) and a proposal by the then President in 2008 to have all schools become English-medium (quickly shelved due to public opposition) to the establishment of 'English Villages' that provide opportunities for real-life language use, and the 'Teaching English in English' (TEE) policy designed to limit L1 use in English classes.

Though many parents send their children to private tuition much earlier, even in kindergarten, Korean children only start learning English formally in school in Grade 3. The basic features of the English education system in Korea's 5,778 government primary schools are given in Table 10, below (sources: Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, <http://english.mest.go.kr/enMain.do>; Korea Institute of Educational Development, www.kedi.re.kr; Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation, www.kice.re.kr).

Table 10: Basic features of English instruction in Korea

Formal school starting age	Six years
Status of English in the curriculum	Part of the National Basic Curriculum
Age at which English instruction starts	Eight years; Grade 3
Organisation of instruction	Two x 40-minute classes for Grades 3–4 Four x 40-minute classes for Grades 5–6
Achievement level objective	School curriculum specifies skills-based ‘accomplishment standards’ for each grade of a general nature
Teaching methods	Age-appropriate communicative, as appropriate to learning objectives
Teaching-learning materials	Criteria for textbooks and instructional materials prescribed by law; textbooks must be approved by Korea Institute for Curriculum and Evaluation; schools choose textbooks from the approved list
Type of teacher	Generalist primary teacher with language teaching skills (acquired through in-service training for older teachers; pre-service for newer teachers); a minority of schools have specialist English teachers
Teacher qualifications	Four-year primary teaching degree; pass national teacher exams including an interview in English
Teacher English language level required	Not specified
In-service provision	Widespread; primary class teachers required to take a minimum of 120 hours for English teaching (language and pedagogy) English has very limited presence in the environment

There is a range of academic literature discussing various aspects of English education in Korean primary schools. Jung and Norton (2002) discuss the implementation of the elementary English programme – English was first introduced into primary schools in 1997 – and provide case studies of selected schools. Of particular note is the limited impact of the 120-hour in-service teacher training programme; as one teacher commented: ‘It was nonsense to ask elementary teachers to teach spoken English with only 120 hours of teacher

training’. (Jung and Norton, 2002: 259) However, it was also found that success could still be achieved if teachers were themselves positive about teaching English and were well supported by school principals. Jung and Norton conclude:

The implementation of the programme shows the importance of support by principals and head teachers as well as the crucial role of teacher training. In schools with adequate support, and where teachers themselves believe that English instruction is important, the conditions for effective language instruction seem to exist. (Jung and Norton, 2002: 264)

The implementation of prescribed communicative classroom methods was reported elsewhere to be problematic. Butler (2005) found that there was a lack of understanding of teaching for communicative purposes, which made it difficult for teachers to implement the curriculum in the classroom as intended by its designers: policy-makers and teachers used terms such as ‘information gap’, ‘student-centred activities’ and ‘authentic language’ without a shared understanding with teachers of what they meant (*ibid.*: 435). Butler (*ibid.*) also found that the policy to use English only seemed to the teachers to be inefficient in many respects and they continued to use Korean; for example, to maintain order in the classroom. The English-only innovation known initially as the ‘Teach English through English’ (TETE) policy, and now as ‘Teach English in English’ (TEE), has also been examined from a classroom perspective by Kang (2008: 224) who found that in elementary schools ‘the full practice of TETE is not always beneficial to students’. In his case study, a teacher made judicious use of the L1 with the students’ interest always at the heart of her language choice. This also aligned with students’ perceptions of language use: they reported being much more motivated to learn English with their current teacher than with their teachers the previous year who had used only English and no Korean at all in their lessons. Exclusive use of English had led to students’ loss of interest, not least because they could not always understand what was happening in the classroom.

Teachers’ own language levels are an obstacle to generalist primary teachers taking responsibility for the teaching of English in the short term, although in the longer term including English as one of the components of the primary teaching degree should lead to higher levels of language and language-teaching competence. Many primary teachers in service at present do not feel they have adequate language skills to teach English. This has been found in a range of studies (Butler, 2004; Hayes, 2008a; Jung and Norton, 2002). The common misconception

that, because they were only teaching beginners, primary teachers do not need much English was rebutted by participants in Jung and Norton's study who commented:

I am not good at English at all, and I have to teach English. I really feel sorry for my students who have to learn English from me.

People think elementary teachers can teach English because the level is very low and easy, but 'being able to teach' is different from 'how to teach'.

There must be much difference in teaching done by somebody who likes English and wants to teach, and who is good at English, and somebody who has to teach out of obligation. There must be something wrong in the concept that all elementary teachers should be involved in English teaching. (2002: 258)

To redress the problem of low language levels among serving teachers, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) has made available a wide range of in-service courses for teachers. These are both short term, usually in school vacations, and long term in the shape of a six-month full-time course with an overseas component in an English-speaking country. Key goals for the ministry's programme of courses are:

- *To improve English teachers' communicative competence as well as to reinforce pedagogical skills*
- *To involve English teachers in long-term professional development while in service (Chang et al., 2008: 13)*

The long-term six-month courses involve considerable financial commitment of 13 million Korean won (c. £7,500) per participant, including £3,378 spent on a one-month course in North America or Australia, yet take-up has been low with only about half of the available 1,000 places per year being filled in past years. It seems that many teachers have difficulty in persuading their school principals to release them for this length of time as it is difficult to find substitute teachers. Research has shown that the goals for in-service provision in general are not being realised in practice, particularly in terms of changes in classroom practice, with teachers complaining that INSET courses are 'made up of theoretical and formal lectures which are not applicable to class teaching' and, where courses do focus on methods, 'the focus is on the secondary teachers' teaching method, not the primary school teaching'. (Hayes, 2008a: 37) In a later paper Hayes (2012a) concluded that in-service provision in Korea would be more effective if (a) teachers were consulted beyond a tokenistic pre-course way; (b) if there was effective post-course follow-up with teachers in schools; and (c) if teachers

were given time and space in supportive school contexts to reflect upon prior experience alongside new knowledge, both alone and in collaboration with colleagues.

To conclude, discussions of English in primary schools in Korea cannot be divorced from the wider context of a highly competitive education system, as Korean parents begin to plot their children's educational future even in kindergarten. The (over) emphasis on English does not seem to be productive in terms of children's learning. Ultimately, time and money spent on private tuition may be wasted as the quality of teaching is often questionable and children become demotivated. In government schools teachers are required to use methods such as 'Teaching English in English', which do not make a great deal of pedagogic sense in an EFL context for young learners, as they deny teachers and children use of a resource for understanding what is happening in the English classroom – their own first language.

Teaching remains a high-status profession which is well-paid – currently the ratio of primary teachers' salaries to the earnings of other full-time workers with tertiary education is 1.34, significantly above the OECD average of 0.82 (OECD, 2013b) – but intense pressure in the education system also impacts teachers, reflected in 'burnout' being seen across all levels of experience, even among relatively new teachers (Kim et al., 2009). The commitment of the government to improving primary English language teaching is admirable but, paradoxically, it seems that less emphasis on English, especially if it were to be taught in a more relaxed teaching-learning environment, might bring about improved results.

8

Country focus 3: Finland

The Finnish education system has been the object of much admiration (or envy) and study in recent years due to its success in the 2003, 2006 and 2009 PISA tests. In 2009 more than 100 delegations from other countries visited Finland to try to find out the secrets of its success in reaching such high achievement levels (Burrige, 2010), including facility with languages. D'Orio (n.d.) reported from a US perspective that: 'The second reason [for success] is all students' fluency with languages. Most students know three languages: Finnish, Swedish, and English.' Finland's educational success has been much discussed and a recent book was devoted to the 'miracle' of Finnish education (Niemi et al., 2012). Simola (2005: 456) noted that at its foundation: 'According to public discussion, it [the success] is unequivocally attributable to the excellent Finnish teachers and high-quality Finnish teacher education'. Teaching is a highly respected profession, with a master's degree the basic qualification for all teachers except those in kindergarten, and competition for places on training courses is high. In 2013 there were 12,493 applicants who participated in the entrance test for Finnish-language class teacher education, of whom only 886 were selected (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2014). Sahlberg (2007) reported that in a poll 'over 26 per cent of general upper secondary school graduates rated the teaching profession as the most desirable', commenting that: 'Classroom teaching is considered to be an independent, high-status profession that attracts some of the best secondary school graduates'. (*ibid.*: 154) Salary levels are, however, not a significant factor in recruitment: the ratio of primary teachers' salaries to the earnings of other full-time workers with tertiary education is 0.89, slightly above an OECD average of 0.82 (OECD, 2013a). The requirement for teachers to have a master's degree has been recognised internationally as having raised the status of teachers in Finland:

Although internationally evidence for status gains associated with higher levels of qualifications is mixed, one clear example is Finland, where the status of teachers and education in general has risen dramatically in recent years alongside the requirement that all teachers are qualified at masters' level. (Hargreaves et al., 2007: 83)

The recent drop in PISA rankings has stimulated much debate in Finland but raw scores do not tell the whole story, as Sahlberg (2013) notes:

PISA consumers should note that not every high-scoring school system is successful. A school system is 'successful' if it performs above the OECD average in mathematics, reading literacy and science, and if students' socio-economic status has a weaker-than-average impact on students' learning outcomes. The most successful education systems in the OECD are Korea, Japan, Finland, Canada and Estonia.

Equality of opportunity is a hallmark of the education system, as the Finnish National Board of Education website proclaims:

The main objective of Finnish education policy is to offer all citizens equal opportunities to receive education. The structure of the education system reflects these principles.

Also notable is the lack of high-stakes examinations in basic education, which starts at age seven and finishes at age 16:

The focus in education is on learning rather than testing. There are no national tests for pupils in basic education in Finland. Instead, teachers are responsible for assessment in their respective subjects on the basis of the objectives included in the curriculum. (www.oph.fi/english/education_system)

Set within this context, the basic features of English language instruction in Finnish basic education are given in Table 11.

Table 11: Basic features of English instruction in Finland

Formal school starting age	Seven years
Status of English in the curriculum	A foreign language is part of the national core curriculum; the choice of language is left to the school; 90 per cent of schools choose English
Age at which English instruction starts	Usually nine years, Grade 3; but may start in Grade 1
Organisation of instruction	Daily and weekly timetables are decided by schools; total number of hours is mandated by the Finnish Board of Education at 228 hours from Grades 3–6
Achievement level objective	A2.1 for receptive skills (first stage of basic proficiency) and A1.3 (functional elementary proficiency) for productive skills on a Finnish application of the CEFR by Grade 6; see Appendix 2 of the Basic Education Curriculum at www.oph.fi/english ; curriculum objectives focus not only on communication in concrete, personally immediate situations but also on intercultural appreciation
Teaching methods	Teachers are free to decide on their own teaching methods to implement the Basic Education Curriculum
Teaching-learning materials	Teachers are free to choose their own materials
Type of teacher	Generalist primary class teacher with language teaching skills
Teacher qualifications	All teachers have a master's degree in primary education, with multidisciplinary studies in subjects taught in basic education
Teacher English language level required	Not specified for class teachers; C1 on the CEFR for English subject teachers (usually for Grade 7 onwards)
In-service provision	CPD is compulsory for teachers; minimum three days per year; teachers expected to be self-motivated
Out-of-school access to English	English has increasing presence in the environment due to economic globalisation Television and films in English are not dubbed into Finnish

Teachers have a high degree of autonomy over teaching methods and materials but in their classes they are expected to interpret the official Basic Education Curriculum. With respect to foreign language education, which as we have seen is predominantly English, curriculum objectives for Grades 3–6 specify that children need to become accustomed to communicating in concrete, personally immediate situations, at first orally and then in writing. There is also a focus on ‘cultural skills’ (knowing about the target culture and comparing it to the Finnish) and ‘learning strategies’ (developing good language study habits, including self-evaluation skills). The focus on self-evaluation by children, even in basic education, parallels the high degree of autonomy given to teachers, who are expected not just to adapt instruction to the needs of their pupils but also to assess learning outcomes and adjust their teaching accordingly, independent of national tests. Autonomy, self-motivation and self-monitoring are central to the educational ethos at all levels and for all curriculum areas.

Though teachers have autonomy in schools, in teacher training they are introduced to basic guidelines for language lessons with a tripartite structure: **1.** Orientation and motivation, **2.** Internalisation of the content by rehearsal and elaboration, and **3.** Application of content in meaningful in- and out-of-school settings’. (Hildén and Kantelinen, 2012: 166) These three phases correspond to **1.** Providing language input in real-life situations, **2.** Understanding the language input in a variety of ways, and **3.** Putting the language to use in novel contexts relevant to the pupil. The extent to which they put these guidelines into practice is not clear, but there are indications that English language teaching in Finnish schools may be relatively ‘traditional’ in some respects, i.e. in terms of the amount of Finnish used in English classes, at least in 7th Grade (Hautamäki, 2008). Other research indicates that teachers in Finland, like those in Kang’s study in Korea, use their L1 for classroom management, such as disciplining students and marking activity boundaries, as well as for discussions of English grammar, while the target language is used for target language practice activities (Miettinen, 2009). This latter study was conducted with teachers in Grade 8 classes, towards the end of basic education. The evidence from both Hautamäki (2008) and Miettinen (2009) may indicate that teaching becomes more formal as children progress through the levels of basic education. The limited evidence available for lower grades indicates that the focus is on the English language for communication, including a developing focus on writing from Grade 3 onwards (Björklund and Suni, 2000).

Though children in Finnish schools may begin learning a second language as soon as they start school, in recent years the proportion who do so has been declining, with only 14 per cent of children starting foreign language study in Grade 1 or 2 in 2010 (Hildén and Kantelinen, 2012). There has also been a recognition that ‘the diversity of language studies is too narrow, having a too heavy concentration on English, in spite of the clear need of, e.g. Swedish, Russian, German and Spanish,’ in the Finnish context (Hildén and Kantelinen, 2012: 173). This recognition notwithstanding, English remains the primary foreign language and is widely used in Finland, with Finns including English in their repertoire of languages without it affecting the status of Finnish and Swedish. Leppänen et al. (2011: 24–25) comment that ‘the spread of English is not a one-directional process of English taking over Finnish society, but rather a process in which English is taken up and made use of by Finns in a variety of ways, in order to serve their own discursive, social, and cultural purposes.’

To conclude, at the heart of the Finnish education system is autonomy for teachers who are both trusted and well respected in the community. This goes alongside a classroom experience for children that is focused on learning and not testing: *development* is emphasised rather than competition and comparison. As in the Netherlands, English is widely used in the social context with many Finns having multilingual conceptions of themselves, using different languages for different purposes in different domains. Though there has been a great deal of international interest in the Finnish education system, Finnish academics caution that their experience is not necessarily transferable to other contexts. Simola (2005) emphasises the situated nature of any educational system, which must be viewed from a historical perspective: those wishing to learn from Finnish ‘success’ should study how the system developed over time in response to its socio-cultural and political context.

9

Teacher education, curriculum and materials for primary English language education

9.1 Initial teacher training

Initial or pre-service teacher training has to be at the heart of successful primary English teaching for the long term. This requires forward planning, especially in systems where governments are considering lowering the age at which English language teaching begins, and even more so when this involves the introduction of English into the primary cycle for the first time. Thus, the teacher education curriculum for primary class teachers should have a focus on age-appropriate foreign language teaching methods as well as teachers' own language proficiency. Ideally, teachers should have a master's degree as a basic qualification for teaching. This would help to ensure that teaching is a high-status profession attracting high-performing students.

As indicated, teachers need not only to have the necessary pedagogical skills to teach primary-age children, but also a high degree of competence in the language, with C1 on the CEFR descriptors as the target level so that teachers are able to cope with the complexity of informal and incidental language required in the primary classroom. Popular perceptions that teachers in primary schools do not themselves need high levels of English, as children are only learning simple English, are completely invalid (Cameron, 2003). Initial teacher training must either (a) set an appropriate English proficiency level as an entry qualification, or (b) provide adequate scope for language improvement during the course. This will often require extensive reconfiguration of existing primary teacher education provision. Also important in this reconfiguration is a recognition that secondary English language teaching methods cannot simply be transported into the primary sector, as Cameron (2003: 106) makes clear:

We need to understand what happens in child foreign language learning, so that teachers can be trained effectively, and so that later learning can build on the early stages. Teacher education and secondary foreign language teaching that take TEYL seriously may look quite different from earlier models that served a system in which language learning began around 11 years of age.

Effective primary English language teacher training will need to equip teachers with an understanding of how children think and learn in general, and how they learn languages in particular, as well as with the skills and knowledge to conduct whole lessons orally (given that children will not be literate in the early primary years) and the skills and knowledge to teach initial literacy in English in the later primary years (Cameron, 2001: 2003).

9.2 In-service teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD)

In-service teacher training (INSET), seen within a model of continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers, has a powerful role to play in the success of primary English language teaching worldwide. This is particularly true for primary class teachers who may have no experience of language teaching but who are expected to begin to teach English, often at short notice. Governments traditionally use cascade INSET models to introduce new curricula, teaching methods and materials to teachers throughout the education system but research worldwide indicates that there is often little classroom take-up from traditional, one-off INSET courses (Hayes, 2000). To be effective, INSET/CPD needs to be classroom focused (but not necessarily to take place in the classroom). For example, in the nationwide programme in Sri Lanka described in Hayes (2000: 2006) teacher training courses were organised in local training centres on a 'day release' basis. For one day a week over the course of three months teachers attended a series of courses on topics directly related to their daily classroom practice. For instance, they learned how to use stories in their classes, practising techniques with their peers in the safe and supportive environment of the training centre and, during the week before the next course, tried out these techniques in their own classes. They were then able to report back on their experience, their successes and any issues they faced, at the beginning of the next course. In this way the direct, practical relevance of the training was apparent even though teachers had to leave their classrooms in order to receive training; contrasting with traditional lecture modes of training where classroom techniques were neither demonstrated by trainers nor tried out by teachers.

Wherever possible, research also indicates the importance of offering in-school support to teachers to assist them in coming to terms with what they have been exposed to on courses within their professional learning community. Ingvarson et al. (2005: 9) noted that many INSET/CPD programmes aimed to improve teachers' classroom skills but they 'found that few participants actually received assistance and feedback in their classrooms during the critical and difficult implementation phase when they were trying out new practices,' in spite of the fact that: 'Follow-up support to teachers during the implementation phase of change has long been identified as an important feature of more effective programmes'. They concluded (*ibid.*: 17) that:

Policy-makers and school administrators need to give equal attention to building the conditions that will enable schools to provide fertile ground for professional learning on an ongoing basis and as a routine part of the job. This study indicates that a substantial level of professional community is vital to significant change. The key ingredients here are time to think, analyse and talk about the specifics of what is going on in classrooms and what students are doing and learning.

These points are also included in Hayes' (2008b: 29–30) list of key concepts for successful INSET for teachers (which also hold for CPD):

- INSET should be thought of as part of *lifelong learning*.
- Long-term, holistic approaches to in-service teacher development are more likely to be effective than short-term skills-based, training approaches.
- Effective INSET is *school focused* but not necessarily school based.
- Best practice in INSET goes beyond training and development for teachers to include training and development for in-service *trainers*.
- Effective INSET practice is reflexive².
- INSET should not always focus on 'new' methods, rather its central concern should be with *effective* methods in terms of their impact on student learning.
- INSET programmes should incorporate evaluation components that go beyond reactions to the programmes themselves to encompass *classroom implementation* of what has been learnt by teachers on the programmes as well as institutional development.

- Time and opportunities to reflect on one's own teaching and to share practice with colleagues are important means of professional development, but working conditions in many educational systems often militate against providing space for these types of INSET.

Clearly, substantial resources are needed for these factors to be realised in practice and governments must decide their priorities. However, teachers cannot be expected to teach English successfully without adequate training and, if they have not received it on a pre-service course, they must of necessity do so through in-service provision.

9.3 The primary English curriculum, instructional time and intensity of instruction

Evidence indicates that if instruction is organised in small periods of time over an extended period (the usual school 'drip-feed' approach) it takes learners much longer to achieve target levels than if instruction is organised in more concentrated periods of time. Further, there are inevitable challenges for teachers in sustaining students' motivation over longer periods when progression is so limited. Research evidence indicates that students learn a language best when instructional time is concentrated. Lightbown (2000: 449) found that: 'The intensity of the exposure and the opportunity to continue using the language over a long period of time is as important as the starting age in the effectiveness of classroom instruction.' Her research concluded that 'students who have intensive exposure to the second language near the end of elementary school have an advantage over those whose instruction was thinly spread out over a longer period of time'. (*ibid.*: 449) Rather than starting earlier in primary school it is more effective to begin instruction nearer the end of the cycle and to concentrate the input children receive. However, school curricula are not organised to allow for concentrated instruction for a single subject in this way: learning of all subjects is expected to be incremental over an extended period of time. This is one area in which research is unlikely to have an impact on practice, making success in realisation of other factors all the more important.

If instructional time during the school week is limited to two or three lessons of 40–45 minutes each, the curriculum needs to allow for adequate recycling of language in a variety of ways and situations of use. This may not be achieved if the curriculum takes a

² In a 'reflexive' approach the training teachers receive models the teaching methods they are expected to implement; thus, trainers should not, for example, lecture about activity-based teaching (if this is a recommended teaching methodology) but should model it in their training sessions with activities that enable teachers to engage with the content.

traditional lock-step, linear approach, as is common with secondary English language teaching. Primary English language teaching is better served by taking an activity-based, experiential approach in which language development is more organic. Cameron (2001: 82) recommends taking themes as the organisational unit, as these allow the greatest scope for opportunities for 'realistic and motivating uses of the language with meaning and purpose for children'. They also allow scope for linking English to other areas of the primary curriculum. Finally, they 'open up the language classroom by bringing in the world outside and linking into children's interests and enthusiasms, not just those that materials writers suppose them to have'. (*ibid.*: 197) An example of themes as the basis for an interdisciplinary curriculum (which could include English as a foreign language) is to be found in the 'International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme', in which the over-arching themes are:

- **Who we are** – an inquiry into the nature of the self; beliefs and values; personal, physical, mental, social and spiritual health; human relationships, including families, friends, communities and cultures; rights and responsibilities; what it means to be human.
- **Where we are in place and time** – an inquiry into orientation in place and time; personal histories; homes and journeys; the discoveries, explorations and migrations of humankind; the relationship between and the interconnectedness of individuals and civilisations, from local and global perspectives.
- **How we express ourselves** – an inquiry into the ways in which we discover and express ideas, feelings, nature, culture, beliefs and values; the ways in which we reflect on, extend and enjoy our creativity; our appreciation of the aesthetic.
- **How the world works** – an inquiry into the natural world and its laws, the interaction between the natural world (physical and biological) and human societies; how humans use their understanding of scientific principles; the impact of scientific and technological advances on society and on the environment.
- **How we organise ourselves** – an inquiry into the interconnectedness of human-made systems and communities; the structure and function of organisations; societal decision-making; economic activities and their impact on humankind and the environment.
- **Sharing the planet** – an inquiry into rights and responsibilities in the struggle to share finite resources with other people and other living things; communities and the relationship within and between them; access to equal opportunities; peace and conflict resolution.

(Source: www.ibo.org/pyp/written/)

These themes provide immense scope for teachers and children to engage in activity-based, experiential learning beyond the confines of subject boundaries, learning which provides opportunities for language use that is predicated on genuine communicative needs and is thus intrinsically motivating for children. However, it must also be recognised that theme-based teaching is very demanding and dependent on skilled, well-trained teachers, underlining the need for effective pre- and in-service teacher education as the foundation of the system.

9.4 Teaching-learning materials

In many school systems pre-packaged teaching-learning materials are provided. In some systems they are thought to help counter any deficiencies in teaching or language skills that a teacher might have. Textbooks are, of course, not a panacea for other failures in the system – i.e. they cannot replace qualified, skilled teachers – and, in some instances, may themselves be a source of problems if they are not founded on a basic understanding of how children learn languages (S. Rixon, personal communication, 26 January 2014).

Arnold and Rixon (2008) make a number of suggestions for high-quality materials for young learners. Echoing Baldauf et al.'s (2011) and Hayes' (2012b) points about continuity between educational levels, they stress the need for an effective bridge between primary and secondary English, with secondary school teachers being more informed about what has happened in the primary classroom. They also maintain that principles behind materials need to be clear and exemplified to teachers, that there needs to be more training to enable teachers to choose and use materials, and that models of language appropriate to the context and goals of instruction need to be considered. Further, with respect to issues within materials, they highlight the need for greater consideration of the order in which skills are introduced for different ages of children, for age-appropriate, child-friendly assessment methods and, to avoid trivialisation of the English curriculum, materials that 'support big moral and intellectual themes and promote educational values appropriate to the age and context of the children concerned'. (Arnold and Rixon, 2008: 54) This endorses Cameron's (2001) recommendation for theme-based teaching.

The use of ICT in materials for young learners is a developing area. Cameron (2001: 244) makes a case for the integration of multimedia technology into teaching-learning materials, noting that:

[O]utside school, students' lives are more and more likely to involve the use of information technology. If students are not to feel that they walk back through time when they enter the classroom, we must be open to new ways of using computers, videos and tools not yet invented, so that what and how we teach in school meshes into their lives.

How this might be achieved most successfully and productively for student learning has yet to be determined, and will clearly be dependent on the context in which materials are developed and used. Arnold and Rixon's (2008: 51) view was that most multimedia materials were still 'disappointingly Behaviourist in design'.

10

Conclusion: checklist of factors influencing success in teaching English in state primary schools

Factors determining the efficacy of the primary education system as a whole underpin specific factors determining the efficacy of primary English education in particular. The list of characteristics that follows must be interpreted within particular socio-educational contexts and not thought of as prescriptive or being universally applicable without local adaptation. With that caveat, to sum up, the following characteristics are desirable for effective primary English language education within national education systems:

1. Teaching by generalist primary class teachers with training in primary English language teaching methods.
2. Teachers with an English language level of at least B2, but preferably C1 on the CEFR.
3. A pre-service teacher training system in which school teachers are required to have master's degrees.
4. A school-focused system of continuing professional development which allows teachers adequate time to reflect on new information about teaching-learning and to incorporate it into existing knowledge structures, both by themselves and in collaboration with colleagues.
5. An education system in which teachers are respected, trusted and given the freedom to organise instruction according to the needs of their pupils within a guiding national framework.
6. Teachers who have positive attitudes towards English and teaching the language. This in turn will influence children's motivation to learn, their enjoyment of their English classes and, ultimately, their achievement.
7. A curriculum which allows teachers and children opportunities to engage in meaningful language use, which also provides opportunities for considerable recycling of target language in new contexts and which is age-appropriate; theme-based teaching is strongly recommended.
8. A realistic language target for children of A1–A2 on the CEFR by the end of the primary cycle.
9. Ideally, instructional time should be concentrated towards the end of the primary cycle rather than provided in smaller amounts over a longer time span, though it is recognised this may be difficult to implement in practice.
10. Ideally, materials should be prepared by teachers to respond to the specific needs of their own classes; where materials are prepared by others, they should be founded on an understanding of how young children learn languages and provide stimulating, theme-based activities promoting genuine communicative language use.
11. Considerable out-of-school exposure to English in the local environment, including through films and television programmes in English which are subtitled rather than dubbed into learners' L1.

Underpinning all of the above are the following characteristics, which relate to the education system as a whole and, thus, are also desirable for effective primary English language education:

12. An equitable education system in which socio-economic status is not linked to academic achievement.
13. An education system in which private tuition is not regarded as essential for academic success.
14. An education system in which high-stakes testing is not seen as a means to promote academic achievement.

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