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## Teaching English to Young Learners: More Teacher Education and More Children's Literature!

**Janice Bland**

### Abstract

This paper explores the demanding and complex nature of English language teaching with young learners. The paper begins with the challenges of the young learner classroom, then goes on to argue that the low estimation of teaching languages in primary education can seriously impact the confidence and efficacy of primary-school teachers. The popular myth that English for young learners is a simple matter requiring neither advanced language skills nor a deep knowledge of educational affordances and pedagogy is interrogated. While it is acknowledged amongst informed teacher educators that language education theory is well served by a synthesis of applied linguistics, education psychology and pedagogical perspectives, the discipline of children's literature is mostly ignored. In this paper, the role of children's literature in teacher education is highlighted and the relevance of high-quality language input is foregrounded. Further, the availability of focused pre-service and in-service teacher education, as well as teacher educators with the necessary expertise, is discussed. Finally, the teacher's role in providing linguistic accommodation to the young learners with storytelling and creative teacher talk is explored. A case is made that the role of the teacher is pivotal, and the opportunities the teacher could share with the children, if sufficiently well prepared, include the collateral-learning educational goals of English for young learners, such as the pleasure of story, multiple literacies and intercultural learning.

**Keywords:** Teaching English to young learners; teacher education; teacher educators; creative teacher talk; children's literature; quality input

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## Introduction

I discuss in this article the challenges of teaching English to young learners (TEYL), and the corresponding implications for teacher education. In this context, it will be outlined how children's literature is relevant and highly recommended (for example, Bland, 2018; G. Ellis, 2018; Mourão, 2016 and Narančić Kovač, 2016). In spite of this, there seem to be difficulties and barriers towards including children's literature in teacher education. In this paper, *teacher education* (TEd) refers to university-based pre-service teacher preparation, and *teacher training* refers to, for example, the school-based mentoring of student teachers in the practicum. A variety of policies across the globe have been developed with the aim of building the linguistic resources of primary-school children (Enever, 2018). But as, among others, Emery (2012), Rich (2018) and Rixon (2017) have argued, the policies on TEYL are often simplistic, ignoring the complex nature of teaching English to children. I put forward findings from applied linguistics and subject pedagogy research to argue that policy makers should pay more attention to the pivotal position of the teacher in early language learning, and the relevance of quality input, and take note of the burden placed on teachers and children and their opportunities for success when the complexity of English for young learners (EYL) is underestimated.

My focus here is on TEYL in the age range from circa six to twelve, which is an age group in which child development progresses rapidly. On the one hand, I have experienced six-year-olds who wonder aloud whether the puppet I am using in storytelling is somehow alive. Twelve-year-olds, on the other hand, are already autonomously acquiring more English out of school than in school in some contexts (though without the language-related educational opportunities of English lessons), often through watching subtitled films (Lindgren & Muñoz, 2013) and spending hours on English-language video games (Sundqvist & Wikström, 2015). Due to the substantial out-of-school English in such contexts, distinctions between English as a foreign language (EFL) and English as an additional or second language (L2) have already become blurred (Graddol, 2006, p. 110). This paper refers to TEYL in primary school in countries where English is not the majority language. Like the controversial term 'native speaker', the related construct 'English as a foreign language' can be considered misleading, for the concept of foreignness suggests

English belongs to some nations and peoples, and not to others. Therefore, the more neutral phrase English language teaching (ELT) will be used.

Recent scholarship has indicated that TEYL is not simply a matter of building linguistic resources, but has important educational consequences, for example in the area of literacies (G. Ellis, 2018; Mourão, 2016), intercultural learning and global issues (Bland, 2016). Researchers recommend motivating usage-based practices, ‘activities such as interactive games, songs, reading aloud, and storytelling’ (Muñoz & Spada, 2019, p. 238). However, Achilleas Kostoulas (2019, p. 46) has referred to ‘the folk linguistic confidence that an early start in language education will always lead to better educational outcomes’. In opposition to the misconception that teaching English to YLs is a simple matter, Rich (2018) argues that the younger the child, the more demanding the task: ‘TEYL is a demanding and skilled process, particularly with children in the early grades of primary school’ (p. 49). This goes further, for the impact of TEYL has deep implications for teachers at secondary level, tertiary level and beyond: ‘Not least this is because increasingly older learners will be those who have already encountered formal second and foreign language learning as children and will carry the impact of this, whether positive or negative, into their further studies’ (Rich, 2014, p. 1).

The consequences of underestimating the many complex aspects of TEYL result in a lack of success for many early start programmes. Rixon has argued ‘even the most carefully planned, widely welcomed and feasibly scoped of policy innovations may still be a complex matter’, adding that, above all, ‘fundamental shifts in attitudes, teacher knowledge and teacher skills’ are required (2017, p. 82). Ortega (2019) points to the ‘drip-feed learning situation’, when there is very little access to the new language, and limited to the classroom, as responsible for disappointing results in early start programmes. Muñoz and Spada (2019) expound that the number of hours devoted to primary English, as well as teacher qualifications and motivation across the transition between primary and secondary sectors, are the factors that most count with regard to TEYL. These are vastly more significant than the age of the learner: ‘in some FL [foreign language] situations it is difficult to find teachers with adequate levels of oral proficiency in the TL [target language] who can offer learners the rich and extensive input needed to trigger language development’ (2019, p. 241).

### **The Challenges of Teaching Young Learners**

The role of the teacher is key with young learners (YLS). Ideally the teacher functions as language and intercultural awareness model, the teacher models as a reader, as a learner and – crucially – models the language to be learned. Wilden and Porsch argue that ‘the teacher is very much at the centre of the FL classroom as opposed to the generally more learner-centred approach of primary education’ (2017, p. 20). Young language learners are highly dependent on the teacher as they have not yet acquired a language repertoire in English, confident general learning strategies (Enever, 2015, p. 22) or, usually, the opportunity and maturity for responsible learner autonomy. In order to support inexperienced learners, TEYL researchers recommend focusing on ‘learning literacy’ (G. Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015; G. Ellis, 2018, p. 97), which can help to avoid the potentially turbulent consequences of children who are over-challenged, unfocused and unsettled. As Nguyen writes, ‘classroom management is a challenge in a primary English class’ (2017, p. 65), and Zein (2018, p. 164) suggests ‘misbehaviour such as lack of respect and rudeness as well as attention seeking in the EYL classroom’ are infrequently explored topics in the research, though see Kuloheri (2016). Copland, Garton and Burns have shown in an expansive study with respondents from Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America that maintaining discipline is very much a concern among teachers of YLS (2014, pp. 746-747).

The repetitive scenarios requiring classroom management with YLS – setting up tasks, handing out materials, or giving feedback, for example – could supply opportunities for realistic target-language use – an additional reason why teachers of YLS should have the advantage of in-depth training to learn to use English flexibly, in order to verbalize as many actions and learning processes as possible. There is no longer any doubt that the plurilingual identities of the children in our classrooms must be acknowledged and valued, in order to support what Jim Cummins defines as their ‘linguistic, intellectual and cultural capital’ (2014, p. 2). Investigating plurilingual children who are learning English as a third language, Cutrim Schmid and Schmidt recommend ‘creating and supporting positive attitudes towards pupils’ home languages [... and] integrating migrant children’s knowledge background into school activities’ (2017, p. 49). There is, however, evidence that there is a strong tendency to overuse the *majority* language in many mainstream TEYL classrooms. Deters-Philipp’s survey of teachers in the German primary school has shown that in this context classroom

routines and management are conducted mostly in German; while she also makes the case that in Germany only 20 to 30 per cent of current teachers of EYL have had the opportunity to study English at tertiary level (2018, p. 21). It is therefore scarcely surprising that secondary-school teachers in Germany quite commonly doubt the advantages of an early start to ELT (Porsch & Wilden, 2017, p. 59).

Yet, children are cognitively stimulated when offered opportunities for developing language-learning strategies, their curiosity and interest in languages are awakened. The potential benefits of TEYL are widely recognized amongst informed circles, but also the crucial point that the teaching must be 'appropriate to the social, psychological, emotional and cognitive needs of children' (Rich, 2014, p. 6). This relates to Dewey's concept of collateral learning and the formation of enduring attitudes, which is often to be found in national curricula for TEYL. Read (2003, p. 7) points to this too, 'we need to keep the richer picture in mind and embrace language training as an integral part of children's whole development and education'. Referring to EYL contexts in China, Japan and South Korea, Jin and Cortazzi write that 'children learn English for fun and through play, but they are also encouraged to use the language to discuss and solve problems and thus develop foundations of critical and creative thinking' (2018, p. 477). They refute a public perception in East Asia as a 'popular myth that EYL involves simple language and therefore does not need special skills or advanced knowledge of pedagogy' (p. 482).

Unfortunately, this is an uninformed myth that persists worldwide, and has exacerbated serious gaps between the rhetoric of the syllabus – that frequently includes the expectation of a creative and holistic approach to TEYL, with cognitive, affective and sociocultural benefits for the children – and the reality of the classroom. What actually happens in the classroom is greatly constrained by the persistent misconception that children can learn a new language just because they are young, and without the support of researched, qualified and reflective teaching. Second language acquisition (SLA) research shows how this exaggeration of the age factor is mistaken, instead the conditions and context of learning are the factors that count:

the availability of teachers with a high level of proficiency in the target language and professional training, rich opportunities for authentic communication in the language, ample instructional time, teaching methodology geared to the learning

needs of young children, as well as consistent and well-designed follow-up instruction in the higher grades. (Hu, 2005, p. 18)

Dynamic pre- and in-service preparation for TEYL, with a focus on quality of input in the classroom (Muñoz & Spada, 2019) should be the key to overcoming these challenges, for, as Read indicates, 'no one ever suggests postponing the age of starting to learn maths because it will be easy to catch up later' (2003, p. 6).

### **Preparation for TEYL – Developments and Constraints**

Due to the relatively recent introduction of TEYL in many contexts, experience is in short supply, both among primary-school teachers (Emery, 2012; Enever, 2014; Zein, 2017, p. 61) and, even more seriously, among teacher educators as well as practicum mentors (Rixon, 2017; Zein, 2015, 2017). Butler (2019, p. 17), asserts that 'both pre- and in-service teacher training in many countries are carried out by trial and error'. In China, for example, Hu (2005, p. 15) describes 'outdated preservice preparation and inadequate in-service support' and 'a naive conception of the professional qualities required of primary foreign language teachers [...] creating more problems than it is meant to solve' (p. 20). Such constraints are common in East Asia (Jin & Cortazzi, 2018), Southeast Asia (Butler, 2019), sub-Saharan Africa (Kuchah, 2018, pp. 79-80), Latin America (Miller, Cunha, Bezerra, Nóbrega, Ewald & Braga, 2018) as well as Europe (Enever, 2014; Rixon, 2018). At the same time, the motivating and interest-engaging practices such as topic-based and story-based teaching that are recommended by research into TEYL pedagogy – fortunately, as Copland and Garton suggest, no longer a Cinderella area of scholarship (2014, p. 223) – magnify the already complex demands on teachers of YLs.

Once in the classroom, even well-prepared teachers are often disadvantaged due to lack of institutional support, or 'unsupportive school cultures' as Rich calls them (2018, p. 49). It is highly problematic, for example, when English is consistently timetabled at the end of the busy school day, or repeatedly cancelled, as my student teachers have reported, because the value of EYL, and the demands on the children as well as on the teacher, are misunderstood. As a teacher educator, I have been privileged to observe student teachers conducting inspiring work in their practicum in Germany and Norway; but when university tutors attend, school timetables are quite often rearranged and the language class given a

sheltered slot so that the YLs are neither too excited nor too tired to concentrate. Given generally these more auspicious conditions, well-prepared teachers could achieve learning for life, as TEYL is meant to be.

### **Teacher Educators for Students of TEYL**

The AILA Research Network in Early Language Learning (<http://www.ell-ren.org/>), launched in 2015, has now 130 members actively researching YL language education worldwide – indicating a healthy and robust international research community. Attitudes outside this community, however, seem to be changing only slowly in many contexts, *including universities*. Compared to the ever-increasing need for English in the primary school, involving around ‘six million teachers working in a wide range of contexts’ (G. Ellis & Knagg, 2013, p. 131) and ‘more than 130 million primary school children’ in China alone (Zein, 2019, p. 2), still comparatively few teacher educators and applied linguists specialize in TEYL and early language learning, and the breadth and complexity of the area is not widely understood among SLA researchers generally. This has led to relatively low respect in the academic community for the teacher education of student teachers preparing for the primary school – teachers who will clearly influence the lives of millions of children (Copland & Garton, 2014, p. 229). This lack of understanding and respect for TEYL echoes the positioning of children’s literature research as the poor relation of traditional canonical literature scholarship with its long history and well-established research community. Solidifying the position of children’s literature in language teacher education as a source of ‘richness in the linguistic environment’ (Muñoz & Spada, 2019, p. 248) specially designed for the target audience (children), might help to overcome this prejudice.

But the lack of researchers working in this area, compared to the vast numbers of children learning English, poses problems. When, as often necessarily happens, there is no colleague on university search committees with expertise in TEYL, there is the danger that new staff recruitment privileges applicants with ELT competences for older teenagers and adults – for such competences are more easily recognized and understood due to the many years of research in the field of adult language learning. This in turn leads to ill-informed decisions on TEEd course design for students of TEYL, an important area that Enever has identified as requiring investigation (2014, p. 241). When no specialized pre-service classes can be offered for student teachers of TEYL due to the lack of qualified teacher educators,

the alternative is generic teacher education for ELT. Here teachers are prepared to teach language for all school types (primary, lower secondary and upper secondary). This happens worldwide and is not ideal (Enever, 2014; Zein, 2015). We then observe how the student teacher for the secondary-school becomes the default student for those teacher educators who only know this context; thus, frequently the needs of primary-school student teachers are neglected. Finally, a lack of potential supervisors for students keen to write MEd and PhD theses in areas of TEYL perpetuates the vicious circle of only few researchers specializing in this area in the foreseeable future.

### **Teacher Education for TEYL**

If we accept that the first steps of ELT must fully embrace child-centred pedagogy, the state of affairs noted by Pinter (2015, p. 4) as to ‘almost no concern for teaching quality. In many contexts around the world, almost anybody can teach English to children’ cannot be justified. Zoltán Dörnyei maintains that language researchers ‘would agree that the teacher is not merely one of the many factors of the educational setup but is one of the most important factors – if not *the* most important one’ (2018, Foreword). While a great deal of political and media attention is paid to the speed (or lack of speed) of SLA with YLs, less attention is paid to whether the teachers of YLs receive the support and training they need, and this despite Rixon’s recent worldwide investigation that reported on the ‘high number of contexts in which provision of suitable teachers is problematic’ (2013, p. 19). On this there is consensus in the research community:

There is a widespread consensus that currently there is a shortage of qualified teachers to address the needs of the huge numbers of children engaged in EFL worldwide, not only in countries with relatively short histories of TEYL, such as a number of Asian countries, but also in countries where English has been part of the primary curriculum for some time. (Rich, 2018, p. 48)

Researchers have emphasized that teacher expertise for TEYL must embrace confident language fluency (but not based on a native-speaker norm) as well as age-appropriate methodology. Rixon mentions ‘the high levels of language competence required on the part of the teacher in order to sustain [...] flexible exchanges with pupils’ (2018, p. 502). Copland and Garton write of teachers needing ‘a strong understanding of children’s social and

cognitive development as well as a good understanding of theories of second language acquisition in order to teach effectively' (2014, p. 225). Similarly, G. Ellis and Knagg maintain that the YL language teacher 'needs to have the knowledge, skills and sensitivities of a teacher of children and a teacher of language and to be able to balance and combine the two successfully' (2013, p. 132).

A McKinsey report (Barber & Mourshed, 2007), investigated how 'what is happening at the level of the school system impacts what is happening in the classrooms, in terms of enabling better teaching and greater learning' (p. 8). The results of the worldwide survey indicate the importance of the status of the teaching profession, and that countries with top-performing schools, such as Finland, Singapore and South Korea, accord teachers high status. The results also demonstrate that the 'quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers' (p. 16). Thus, the insufficient time and resources allocated for continuing professional development (CPD) for English teachers at the primary level is manifestly detrimental. There is little doubt, moreover, that teacher efficacy, which is closely connected to teacher confidence, is also undermined by the wide-spread societal attitude that undervalues the work of primary-school teachers in many countries and the lack of status of TEYL – despite the high status of the English language. Enever writes of 'an urgent need to substantially increase the provision and availability of in-service courses and workshops for teachers if quality is to be improved and sustained' (2014, p. 241). While both TEd and CPD are still underdeveloped, many researchers of TEYL strongly urge that not only how to teach YLs, but *what* to teach and *why* in EYL should belong to the repertoire of the primary-school language teacher for meaningful learning, the 'the whats, hows and whys of our professional existence' as Kostoulas (2019, p. 34) puts it.

### **Themes of TEYL**

At a 2018 international conference entitled Early Language Learning (Institute of Foreign Languages, University of Iceland), 120 researchers presented on a wide range of themes with a young-learner focus, encompassing:

- plurilingualism – support of diverse home languages of the school community,
- language awareness and language development,
- teaching the four skills,
- formative and summative assessment,

- Content and Language Integrated Learning scenarios,
- making use of out-of-school English,
- inclusion and mixed-ability teaching,
- the role of parents,
- corrective feedback,
- materials development,
- task-based learning,
- drama and whole-body learning,
- reading in a second language.

This gives an initial idea of the complex range of relevant issues and approaches that teachers of YLs should be able to master – and which are in most cases at least as difficult to manage both well and in a time-efficient way with YLs as with secondary-school students. Themes directly concerning quality of input and intercultural learning were, however, not represented at the conference.

### **The Relevance of Quality Input and Context**

For most contexts where English is not the majority or school language, the main sources of children's language input are the teachers themselves and the materials they use in the classroom: 'Because in FL instruction the input is limited to the classroom setting, the language to which learners are exposed is restricted to what is provided in the teaching materials, textbooks and teacher talk' (Muñoz & Spada, 2019, p. 241). The materials may include EFL textbooks, worksheets, audio-visual recordings, picturebooks and poems, drama and stories for oral delivery. The relevance of quality input and context in SLA with children is increasingly highlighted by applied linguists. Referring to children younger than eight, Nicholas and Lightbown suggest: 'differences between first and second language development may depend more on context than on abstract cognitive mechanisms' (2008, pp. 28-29). Whereas learners in their teens and older are usually able to master explicit metacognitive strategies to support their language learning, younger children mostly make use of the language in their environment with the aid of implicit learning mechanisms (Cook & Singleton, 2014, p. 28; Murphy, 2014, p. 5). Rather than an innate language-learning ability, it is increasingly recognized that it is a domain-general strong predisposition for social interaction and learning that enables and encourages language development in young children. This naturalistic language learning comes about through the receptive usage of

listening (and later reading) and productive usage of speaking (and later writing). As Kersten writes, ‘usage-based approaches to L1 and L2 development hold that rules are abstracted solely from the input using general learning principles’ (2015, p. 135).

But if language-learning ability is not latent in the brain, not a hard-wired, instinctual capacity of YLs, but is a context-bound phenomenon, it follows that the language environment of the classroom is key to children’s language learning. This is a huge challenge for the teacher when there is so little time, with classes typically just once or twice a week, and when – particularly for YLs – ‘adequate exposure to the language is one of the essential conditions for successful language learning’ (Rixon, 2013, p. 29). Paradoxically, if children are implicit learners, but language acquisition is *not* innate, focus on form in TEYL – such as making multi-item chunks in literary texts salient through meaningful repetition and recycling in child-centred and striking contexts – is crucial for ELT in YL instructed contexts. Above all, the input must excite YLs so that they are motivated to understand (Kaminski, 2019) and also keen to adopt multi-item chunks in their own communications, using them according to Nick Ellis as ‘phrasal teddy bears’ (2012, p. 29).

Recycling of accessible language is important for implicit learning – perception and memory are affected by frequency of usage, helping children to tune into the system and notice patterns. This non-analytic processing mode means that YLs can potentially ‘develop more native-like grammatical intuitions’ (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017, p. 89). However, only with high quality input can YLs acquire an inventory of grammatical categories and lexical patterns, and with the limited time available for teaching this means every input opportunity must count. Serratrice argues:

Quantity and quality input are strong predictors of children’s early lexical skills, which in turn are closely related with emerging grammatical skills. Cultural practices like book reading, story-telling, and singing songs that are associated with larger vocabularies in monolingual children have also been found to be of importance in bilingual children (2019, p. 35).

Psycholinguistically salient, curiosity-inviting language, with sentences that are simple or sometimes compound but avoiding syntactical complexity, will help the children notice the patterns. Whereas formulaic sequences – semi-fixed expressions or multi-item

chunks – raise awareness of underlying patterns (Wray, 2005), many teachers of YLs focus on introducing single-word items, which is known as ‘the noun problem’ (Kersten, 2015, pp. 136-137). Language development can be accelerated by promoting adaptive-productive imitation of language patterns, for, according to Larsen-Freeman (2011, p. 49): ‘These patterns subsequently become part of learners’ language resources, available for further use and modification’. If the teacher has knowledge of and access to meaningful materials to share with YLs, such as complex picturebooks set in different cultural contexts, the competence areas of the secondary school, including critical thinking, multiple literacies, sociocultural learning and language awareness, can be prepared already in the YL classroom.

### **Children’s Literature as High-Quality Input in TEYL**

There are important reasons for including a focus on children’s literature in language teacher education. These often include providing

- entrancing repetition of multi-item chunks, to be used as ‘phrasal teddy bears’ (Ellis, 2012, p. 29),
- phonological repetition, typically ‘strong sound patterning: dynamic rhythm and rhyme, parallelism, assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia and refrains’ (Bland, 2015a, p. 151),
- high quality language input, characterized by stylistic cohesion through marked lexical repetition and lexical chains, parallelisms and the melodic tricolon – the rhetorical rule of three (Bland, 2013, p. 8),
- opportunities for retellings – providing more essential repetition,
- comprehension support, through motivating story and stimulating images,
- motivation for dynamic and genuine interpersonal communication,
- typographic experimentation (Bland, 2013, pp. 122-124) and creative word choices, encouraging children’s own creative writing,
- freedom from coursebook-driven ELT and one-size-fits-all materials,
- opportunities for intercultural learning and changing perspective when entering storyworlds and discovering different ways of living – children’s ‘weaker group identity’ (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2017, p. 90) means they are often open to difference,

- opportunities for connections across children's languages and their literacy development generally,
- children's own perspectives, noting that, as Peter Hunt writes:

Even at its most abstract – and it can be very abstract – children's literature scholarship recognizes the essential presence of the child in the book, and equally recognizes the sophistication of even the apparently simplest text and the complexity of children's responses to texts (2018, p. xiii).

- Last but not least, language teachers can also learn new ideas and new language through children's literature.

In this way, children's literature can provide high-quality input and strong roots for children's emerging language learning:

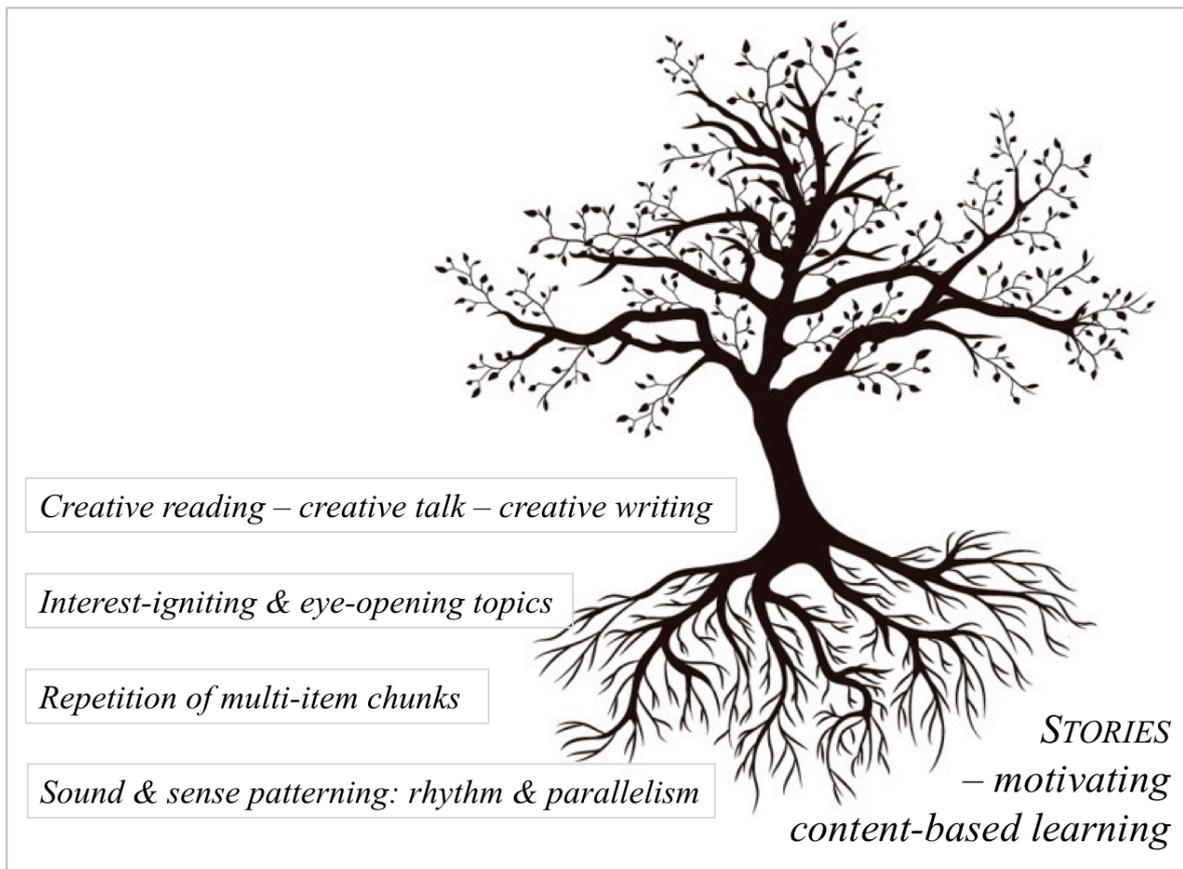


Figure 1: Stories as the *roots* of TEYL  
(see also Figure 5 in Becker & Roos, 2016, p. 22)

We know that formulaic language is used extensively in the L1: ‘corpus linguists have been able to show that language users make use of prefabricated language far more often than previously thought’ (Kersten, 2015, p. 130). However, YLs with meagre L2 input need support in perceiving and memorising multi-item chunks. The frequent use of picturebooks rich in patterned language, poems and rhymes with highly repetitive and interest-igniting content, if both accessible and appealing to the YLs, will strongly support the necessary repetition, frequency and salience (Bland, 2015a, 2018).

While children need help noticing the language patterns in the stories the teacher brings into the classroom, teachers need help in discovering and selecting the materials that are most conducive to supporting children’s receptive and productive language development, as well as their intercultural understanding. Arizpe, Farrar and McAdam argue that a key purpose of teacher development is to prepare,

an understanding of the central tenets of how to decode, encode, and make meaning across a range of modes. Knowing how picturebooks work and how to make multimodal meaning will lead to confident educators, mediators and other professionals who can critically select texts that develop ‘literacies’ required for twenty-first-century life. (2017, p. 377)

Unfortunately, suitable literary texts are little known by applied linguists, who typically design pre-service TEYL courses, and in most contexts children’s literature plays an extremely limited or non-existent role in pre-service TEd for language teachers. The newly published *CEFR Companion Volume with New Descriptors* lists 83 scholarly sources as references (Council of Europe, 2018, pp. 224-7). The references are drawn from recent scholarship in the areas of intercultural competence, SLA, assessment and L2 pedagogy. However, there are just three sources that relate to language and literature learning: one unpublished text, one article published in 1994 and one in 1971. This is a serious flaw, because the CEFR-related publications are very influential for language curricula developers, particularly in Europe. Teacher education for TEYL should profit from an inclusive interdisciplinary approach. Kostoulas (2019, p. 33) usefully identifies three research areas: ‘the informing disciplines of applied linguistics, language education psychology, and pedagogy’. Yet this still disregards the discipline of children’s literature,

despite the fact that in countries such as Austria, Croatia, Germany, Greece, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the USA pedagogical research into literature in language education has developed immensely in recent years. The understanding of children's literary texts today strives to be global and inclusive, around themes such as cultural diversity, intercultural citizenship education, the environment and social justice, featuring children with disabilities, in minority and refugee situations (Bland, 2016). Moreover, children's literature appears in English, beside books published in indigenous languages, in very many countries around the world, including Nigeria and South Africa, Hawai'i, India, Singapore, Malaysia and Jamaica (see Stephens, Belmiro, Curry, Lifang & Motawy, 2018).

### **Learning How to Use the Picturebook in TEYL**

Teachers could benefit in motivation, confidence and teacher efficacy from comprehensive training in using children's literature in ELT, however, this is seldom a part of TEd. An exception is to be found in an innovative study programme of primary English at the Faculty of Teacher Education in Zagreb, Croatia (Narančić Kovač, 2016), which aims to provide the following:

- experience of a wide range of children's literary texts,
- the theory of children's literature, for example the picturebook,
- the ability to evaluate the potential of a book for ELT and design activities for young learners.

Systematic support like this can make a huge difference, but without it, teachers are unsure why to use children's literature, what the criteria are for the most suitable materials, where to access them, and how to exploit them for language and literacy learning as well as intercultural learning.

To support the use of children's literature, researchers in northern Italy devised a small-scale study reporting on a short training course in using picturebooks with YLs of English:

The overall aim was to address teacher anxieties about the use of picturebooks in an L2, enhance teacher perceptions of how picturebooks may be used in FL teaching, facilitate their critical reading of picturebooks and consider how picturebooks may be used to promote intercultural learning or be used in a

content-based programme. (Mair, 2018, p. 102)

However, the teachers' reflections in the study evidenced that, following what was recognized as an extremely brief training – two three-hour workshop sessions – the teachers focused only on vocabulary learning affordances. It was found that teachers fear both speaking freely and reading aloud, and

there was not much attention given to the imaginative and artistic possibilities of language or to the role picturebooks might have in developing understanding of literary conventions, raising awareness of techniques of illustration or stimulating children's output, even in the L1. (Mair, 2018, p. 107)

This highlights that expertise, time and resources must be devoted to TEd and CPD, if more success is to be achieved for TEYL, for as Butler declares, 'it is apparent that short-term, one-shot trainings/workshops have limited effects (2019, p. 34)'.

Primary-school children have concepts and interests well beyond their narrow English-language skills, which creates a challenge for the teacher. Children's ideas and aspirations can be highly developed, so that teachers need the knowhow to bridge the gap between the cognitive level and the less developed linguistic skills of YLs by selecting the 'right' story. Vivienne Smith (2011, p. 117) expounds the importance of a 'literary and musical understanding of what language is doing' in picturebooks:

A careful evaluation of the language will help teachers match texts to the linguist and emotional needs of the children they teach, and so help them find the right texts for the right child. What better way is there to help children understand that reading is worthwhile than to give them wonderful texts that fully meet their needs? [...] Teachers who can hear and analyse what a text is doing are well placed to help children get the most out of what they read. [...] Finally, a critical analysis of text and how it works can help teachers raise children into a greater awareness of how text works in the political world in which we live.

It is thus imperative that teachers are given the opportunity to learn that 'Real success depends on having the right story for the linguistic and cognitive ability and interests of the children in order to maximize their enjoyment, involvement and learning' (G. Ellis, 2018, p. 84). It is apparent that, to be able to make effective use of children's literature, teachers need

in-depth guidance in extending their own literary competence, their own visual literacy, critical literacy and response to multimodal texts, in order to learn how to support, scaffold and reformulate YLs' responses to pictures. Teachers are often unsure how best to steer the classroom discourse around the pages of a book – which must surely be considered a fundamental competence of teachers in TEYL.

### **Linguistic Accommodation to YLs**

Symbols and patterns are vital for children's search for meanings in the world about them, their daily lives, the stories they hear, and the languages they learn. Interpreting symbols and pattern matching are integral to the pleasures of narrative, and a basic way that humans process meanings and acquire new information, as well as fundamental to language learning. In TEYL, the teacher is also a major source of language input, as Muñoz and Spada write (2019, p. 246), 'the quality of input (e.g. teachers' language proficiency) is crucial at this very early age'. Thus, an important goal of YL TEEd must be to help teachers master fluent language skills, as well as skills to cunningly scaffold YLs by using pattern-rich teacher talk that is modelled on child-directed speech, supporting children as seekers of meaningful patterns.

Qualified primary-school teachers are frequently skilled storytellers in the common classroom language (CCL), but it is very far from simple to employ creative verbal scaffolding in the L2 spontaneously. Due to the damaging misconception that only basic English is needed for the primary school, teachers' English language skills, and specifically their development in the competence of verbal scaffolding and linguistic accommodation to YLs, frequently plays next to no role in pre-service TEEd. Even when student teachers are fluent academic speakers of English, they will still need training in learning to emphasize the language patterns in classroom interactions – as implicit focus on form – in order to render them both comprehensible and noticeable to young learners. If children experience template-like exemplars in a stimulating context, this is likely to result in language emergence over an extended period of time. Time, after all, is the one asset that YLs definitely have – but with minimal weekly input only a long view of their language learning is purposeful. On the other hand, mostly due to regular participation in video games and non-dubbed television, some children acquire more lexical items and associated syntactic constructions than their language teachers. Copland, Garton and Burns have shown how this

can affect teachers' confidence – a primary teacher in their study reports, 'Korean students' English proficiency is getting higher. I feel some burden about my own English proficiency' (2014, p. 753).

According to Bland (2015b, pp. 190-2), 'creative teacher talk' is an important teacher skill for TEYL, for oral storytelling, picturebook readalouds and classroom discourse generally. Creative teacher talk is interactive, highly repetitive and with chant-like routines and expressive prosodic features, including carefully modulated pitch, tempo, volume and rhythm to attract attention and underline meanings. Depending on the topic, the YL teacher may make use of dramatic pauses and exuberant intonation. In addition, creative teacher talk is accompanied by the scaffolding of gestures and facial expressions, elaboration, a slower speech rate, additional contextual cues and realia as well as comprehension checks. The teacher extends and recasts children's incomplete responses, and maintains teacher-to-learner eye contact, shaping the talk to the audience, for we cannot expect children to adapt to the teacher.

When the teacher shares a picturebook with YLs, the children will offer many interjections in the CCL, or – if encouraged – sometimes in their home language if that differs from the CCL. YLs will often quite naturally echo the teacher if she recasts their interjections into English; they will also echo the words of the story. This murmured echoing, like young children's private speech, increases productive language usage in the very little time available and can help build up a repertoire of language patterns for imitation and adaptation (see also Kaminski, 2019). Language teaching in the primary school is far from a one-size-fits-all simple matter. Primary school teachers are responsible for the whole development of the child, and children thrive on varied pathways and at individualized rates – as Larsen-Freeman maintains, 'humans bring with them unique starting points. Even our brains are different. Humans then shape their own contexts in a unique manner' (2011, p. 57).

### **Conclusion**

Considering the constraints on early language teaching, the extremely restricted time available, limited opportunities for pre-service TEd and in-service CPD, and teachers' consequent lack of awareness of (or access to) motivating resources such as high-quality picturebooks, the goals of ambitious TEYL curricula are currently decidedly difficult to

realize. TEYL research acknowledges that the teacher's role is vital and hugely challenging. Practising teachers of YLs need the support of CPD in order to extend their pedagogical content knowledge and craft repertoire, but the low status of TEYL is impeding the necessary opportunities. Frequently, there is also a shortage of expertise for TEYL among university teacher educators and school mentors. Teachers have an important role as an intercultural and language awareness model, they model as reader and learner themselves, and model the language the children are learning.

TEYL researchers report that in many contexts the language input is extremely thin and classroom routines and management, for example, are not conducted in the target language, so that YLs are not able to build up a language repertoire. In some contexts, out-of-school learning partly, but unevenly, compensates for the drip-feed input in the classroom. However, relying on out-of-school learning will mean that language-related educational goals including intercultural awareness, multiple literacies, the pleasure of sharing stories from around the world and critical thinking are being missed. An important step in alleviating these critical issues is for the demands on the teacher as well as the pivotal but still underdeveloped role of teacher education to be better understood and supported. Both academic fields, EYL and children's literature, need to be appreciated in their complexity in order to facilitate bridging the two research areas. For TEYL, as a highly valuable and challenging phase of language and literacy learning, has a great deal to offer both children and society in our increasingly interconnected world, just as Arundhati Roy has written in her recent essay (2018):

As the wrecking ball of the new global economic order goes about its work, moving some people toward the light, pushing others into darkness, the 'knowing' and the 'not knowing' of English plays a great part in allocating light and darkness.

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