

A Look Ahead: Foreign Language Encounters and Future Challenges of Primary English Language Education

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1. A focus on English in primary education

Encounters in foreign languages happen on a daily basis. First encounters with different foreign languages are a social reality, especially in Germany – a country in which roughly one third of all people have a migration background (Destatis, 2022). For German-speaking children growing up monolingually, such first encounters – whether in kindergarten or school – usually take place in English before institutionalized early foreign language teaching. Children are likely to encounter the use of English as a lingua franca in communicative situations at playgrounds or on holiday, or they may encounter English through digital media. In addition to the importance of learning two or more foreign languages from a very early age, which was concluded at the Barcelona European Council meeting in 2002 (Council of the European Union, 2014), English as the lingua franca is a perfect choice for the first foreign language to be learnt at school for a number of reasons:

First, English is omnipresent in daily interaction, for instance in the use of loanwords (e.g. etwas ‘liken’, eine ‘App’) and in the language of pop cultural texts including comics, music, and films (cf. Werner, 2018). As such, English does not only dominate language use and spheres of audio-visual culture such as the television and film industry, but also areas of daily life and interaction such as clothing, food, and toys. What is more, English is a global language and it exists in various forms – thus the preferred term global Englishes in the plural, which further hopes to help overcome the “prevailing monolingual myth” in English language education (Galloway, 2017, p. 1). English is used by people across the world in a great range of different contexts. It is the language of aviation, shipping, international tourism, the universal church, sporting events, international congresses and committees, from the Council of Europe to

the United Nations. A great number of the world's scientific journals are written in English as are business contracts and information stored on servers worldwide, and this list seems practically endless.

The content of foreign language teaching and learning in primary schools is therefore well founded with the English language (or *languages* in the plural), its literatures and English-speaking cultures. Certainly, this does not exclude a multilingual approach (cf. Ludwig & Sambanis, 2022) – although ways of integrating multilingual activities at primary school must yet be conceptualized and empirically investigated. Importantly, all efforts to teach English in primary school are aimed at children. When they enter first grade, they bring enormous potential for a successful language acquisition and learning process with them. Where, then, does the completely outdated discussion about language sequences and number of English lessons in different grades come from, despite ideal language acquisition conditions?

If parents' fears about their children being overwhelmed by the new language, the possible neglect of the German language as well as about structural reasons, such as the lack of nationwide all-day instruction, are eliminated from this discussion without trivializing them, a special foreign language learning context emerges in primary schools:

In addition to the generally short contact time with all languages, including German, the generally largely non-authentic English-language input in the classroom situation is particularly problematic - to put it in simplified terms. The communication there is largely language-related, not content-related, systematic instruction prevails, and regular real-life applications are missing. In elementary school English lessons, the students often receive language material that is selected according to foreign language didactic aspects and is certainly also intended to promote an authentic engagement with language, but on a much narrower basis than possible compared to natural language acquisition. Dealing with the correct spelling of words plays a marginal role, orality is in the foreground. The language material is pre-structured through selection and arrangement, and conveyed regarding specific competence formulations, which makes it much easier to classify them into existing knowledge

structures. Sensitive error correction helps to eliminate incorrect linguistic hypotheses. In all, the underlying primary didactical formula could be reduced to “long exposure and regular use”. And, what is true for the English language, should also be correct for all languages in a continuum of all languages used.

2. The future road to follow: Embedding all languages on a learning continuum

Irrespective of increasingly secure knowledge about early foreign language, the problems of the 1960s have remained relevant long after the turn of the millennium: In addition to the structurally and financially justified lack of well-trained primary school English teachers, a smooth transition from elementary schools to secondary schools in year 5, for example, is still something to be desired.

The different beginnings of early English learning in the German federal states in the first, second or third grade of primary school ensure an unequal starting situation in the institutionalized encounter with a foreign language. In Bavaria, for example, English lessons currently begin in grade 3, in Hamburg in grade 1 and in North Rhine-Westphalia in the first half of the first grade. This imbalance naturally increases at the transition from primary to secondary school. The different number of English lessons in the timetables of primary schools lead to a strongly divergent build-up of English-language skills. In addition, the curricula of the individual federal states are difficult to compare, just like performance assessments and documentation at the end of the 4th grade, which are partly based on grading as in Baden-Wuerttemberg, partly on verbal reports as in Bavaria.

Both then and later, during the transition to the professional, tertiary area, it becomes apparent how different the English language foci are not only in terms of pedagogy, methodology and didactics, but also in terms of the timetable and the freedom to choose a foreign language individually on all school levels. This break or gap has its roots in the 1960s and 1970s. Secondary schools were generally not prepared for the first wave of foreign language teaching being introduced in primary schools. In the

decades that followed, coordination improved in different regions, particularly due to the transfer of early foreign language teaching from being arbitrary to compulsory school subjects, which, however, continued to differ in German federal states. As a result, further systemic and structural instabilities were generated in a cascading manner. This led to many misunderstandings among teachers at primary and secondary level, largely the result of information deficits about the lessons in the subsequent years at secondary school.

Despite the diverse educational policy efforts regarding joint curriculum development, problems remain with the subjective attitudes of the teachers involved, their different levels of training, differences in hourly quotas and still large curricular leeway. In addition, there is a lack of national educational standards. This is where the overarching process and field of action for school policy and school administration lies, the location and embedding of English lessons in primary schools in a reliable, orderly and comparable continuum of lifelong foreign language learning.

All those responsible must be involved in order to arrive at well-balanced solutions in favor of harmonious, continuous and lifelong learning of English and foreign languages, despite the *Länder*-specific diversity. In every learning process, and therefore also in the learning of English, continuity describes gapless, flowing, uninterrupted, even and steady relationships without abrupt changes in school policies. Such continuous learning results in increased anticipation as well as an associated learning planning and action security for both teachers and learners.

On such a continuum (BIG, 2009), language teaching and learning processes develop progressively, constantly and continuously. Some structures, however, have a negative effect on such a desired development. They can be of curricular, institutional or structural origin, for instance, a diversified understanding of competence objectives among those in charge of primary education, deficient teacher training or a different understanding of the children's interculturality or cognitive competences. Those factors prevent a continuous, reliable early English learning. This also applies to foreign language learning in general. In the continuum of

language learning, school forms and levels must not be seen as stand-alone institutions or be viewed as such.

However, the process of comprehensive and long-term harmonization requires an adjustment of the system differences at all levels mentioned. For learning English especially, there are pedagogical and didactic-methodical measures that take everyone involved at the teaching/learning level into account. Aspects of teacher-learner relationships are also considered, for example in the subject teacher, class teacher, course leader principle, the different language learning cultures, changed expectations and the diverging social structure of the school levels.

The concept of lifelong (foreign language) learning refers to the need to create the conditions inside and outside of educational institutions to be able to learn languages for a lifetime in order to be able to actively participate in the ever more rapidly changing international and multicultural society. The English language as the lingua franca and generally the first foreign language to be learned in Germany is a suitable starting point.

The main rescue package for ending all discussion about sense and nonsense of teaching English to young learners consists initially and uncompromisingly in the development of an overall language concept of the Conference of Ministers of Education. This should range from the last year of kindergarten/pre-school with related curricula/timetables up to secondary level, including the implementation of educational standards for the subject English in year 4 or the subject English as a core subject with at least 3 hours per week and interdisciplinary approaches and bilingual programs, as well as in a second step, up to the tertiary level.

3. Empowering teachers

The simultaneous quality assurance of these basic measures aims at an institutionalized and nationwide offer of advanced and further training concepts for university-trained and non-qualified teachers. Additional training for non- or less qualified teachers within a few weeks or months can only - accepted with grudging teeth - be a temporary instrument for the current transitional situation.

The constant expansion of foreign language skills offered to practising teachers through targeted, consistent coaching units and suitable online training platforms will immediately be reflected in the target group, the elementary school students. Thanks to their considerable potential for imitation, young learners will be able to reproduce the language presented through their teachers as target language models. At the same time, as the proportion of English spoken in class by self-confident teachers increases, the lessons will become more communicative, more meaning-focused, more open, and more appropriate to the situation of language learning on the whole. Anyone who speaks English well is also more open and more flexible in terms of didactics and methods, since concentration no longer has to serve one's own foreign language performance, but rather the communicative processes in the classroom.

From a didactic point of view, there are few but important adjustment screws that can be turned in order to achieve professionalization in the direction of English lessons suitable for primary school children. Above all, it is important to consider the cognitive potential of the children. This means that teachers should present the spelling of words to learners in a targeted manner as part of English-language literacy. The first reading and writing activities can quickly strengthen skills in this area. Furthermore, grammatical phenomena and structures can be integrated as chunks as required, possibly explained if considered necessary or relevant to (some individual) learners. Using the German language (or other languages) may help learners to quickly explain certain regularities, and encouraging learners to reflect upon other first languages they may speak can be valuable as a first step towards developing learners' language awareness (Jakisch & Sturm, 2019).

The selection of the language material, which includes authentic texts that are age-appropriate on the one hand and provides useful communicative vocabulary, especially verbs, on the other hand, is valuable in terms of developmental psychology and English didactics. Both printed and digital picturebooks hold great potential in that regard. Concerning the latter, digital adaptations of printed picturebooks as well as apps (cf. Yokota & Teale, 2014; Al-Yagout & Nikolajeva, 2018) could enable a skills-integrated and more authentic interaction with literary texts, provided that IT

specialists, educators, and TEFL researchers cooperate and make the most of the affordances digital elements have to offer for foreign language learning. To give some examples, apps could provide scaffolding (i.e. by reading aloud certain chunks, visualizing and explaining vocabulary) or initiate interaction by prompting learners to interact with each other or a character in the story. As Al-Yagout and Nikolajeva (2018) point out, “[s]uccessful apps utilize the affordances of the medium, offering young readers unique educational and aesthetic experiences” (p. 277).

Differentiating, individualizing, cooperative, collaborative and inclusive methods strengthen young personalities learning English in the classroom. Interdisciplinary, bilingual units with topics from other learning areas of primary school promote learning in two languages – early preparation for future secondary and tertiary education. Incidentally, they increase contact times with the English language and thus contribute to the development of partial bilingualism.

The acceptance of mistakes should also become an important parameter for the English-language learning process. As Shin et al. (2021) highlight, “[s]tudents will make mistakes, a natural part of language development” (p. 67). Mistakes are thus a basic requirement for diagnostic analyses, not for the pure grading, so that both the weak and the strong can be individually supported. Appropriate quality assurance methods for observing, documenting and evaluating elementary school English lessons, which are ideally based on minimum standards, such as the observation sheet and the portfolio, already exist, but they still need to be further developed and, above all, used.

The necessity of really having to ‘save’ English lessons in German elementary schools from radical cuts or deletions seems neither obvious nor necessary in view of the requirements of European politics. Nevertheless, it is the constant drop of criticism of its still unclear role in the educational process, albeit the rather singular, pilot and project-like efforts, which wears away the stone, the social and political support of early encounters with foreign languages. Without any doubt, the quality and quantity of foreign language education for the young target group, primary school children learning English, must be saved. Without the

measures described, the foreign language world will hurry away from young learners in the future.

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