

Foreword

Carol Read

This book is timely and significant for a number of key reasons. First, the book adds substance to the growing body of theoretical and research-based literature on teaching young learners which has been much needed in recent years. Despite the fact that, globally, there are many more young learners than adults learning English as a foreign language, English language teaching to adults has nevertheless continued to be the 'default' in areas such as teacher education, SLA studies, syllabus design and classroom methodology, as well as the principal focus of research. Unfortunately, this has also at times been accompanied by negative attitudes towards foreign-language teachers of children who have been characterized as doing little more than playing games, singing songs and telling stories in their classrooms in a way that does not recognize the competences and skills needed by a professional foreign-language educator of children. This book not only contributes to setting a new 'default' for teaching young learners but also serves to unpack the range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and professional qualities that are needed to teach children successfully.

Second, in the context of an educational climate which increasingly seeks to standardize, measure and test language performance, this book explores those factors in early foreign-language learning which are hard to pin down and provide empirical evidence for, but which nevertheless are likely to be at the heart of teaching and learning success. As well as a focus on the key role of holistic learning with young learners, there is a welcome emphasis on the importance of rich exposure to language, including repeated patterns, formulaic sequences and 'chunks' which can be remembered and transferred to other contexts. Opportunities for natural interaction and meaningful repetition in engaging contexts, leading to creative outcomes, whether through the use of drama, play, oral storytelling, picturebooks or poetry, are also seen as crucial to learning. The advantages of such an approach are not seen narrowly in terms of measurable linguistic outcomes but rather in terms of the whole learner and the more elusive social, psychological, cognitive, metacognitive, affective and emotional benefits that underpin children's motivation and learning success. Early foreign-language learning is also integrally linked to the development of intercultural understanding, empathy, self-awareness and respect for others, and to broadening children's view of the world.

Third, the book reveals the gap between the competences and qualities that are needed by teachers of young learners in order to be effective and actual practice in many classrooms, which highlights the need for more specialized teacher education.

It is clear that teaching children in the ways suggested in this book requires a high level of skill and language competence. It is also not surprising that many teachers reportedly shy away from using more risk-taking activities such as drama and storytelling in their classes and prefer to stay on safer, more formal instructional ground with activities such as sentence repetition or gap-fill texts. This understandable reluctance highlights a pressing need for more in-depth, specialized teacher education for young-learner teachers. As well as knowledge and understanding about children's development and when, why and how to best scaffold and support their learning, teachers need to develop a range of multiple practitioner skills and sub-skills such as designing and sequencing age-appropriate activities and tasks, developing children's critical and creative thinking skills, providing feedback which supports learning and assessing learning.

Finally, through the book's discussion of ways to most appropriately support children's foreign-language learning, certain limitations of some existing published English language teaching materials for young learners are revealed. Aspects of these include limited opportunities for language exposure, teaching vocabulary in isolation, 'stories' labelled as such but which are in fact situational sequences rather than well-constructed stories and 'CLIL' content, also labelled as such, but which lacks the academic vocabulary and language needed to adequately explore concepts from other areas of the curriculum. While the depth of theoretical understanding and insight which informs primary English language teaching materials vary hugely in different contexts and countries, it is also important to remember that publishers do their main market research by asking primary-language teachers what they want to see in their materials, as well as of course keeping a close eye on the syllabuses and formats of external EYL tests and examinations. Increased knowledge, understanding and awareness of the processes of children's foreign-language learning by teachers through more specialized young-learner teacher education courses would not only increase the effectiveness of classroom practice but also raise awareness of principled criteria for quality materials that are most suitable to use. This would potentially lead to changes in some of the currently available published language teaching materials for children and possibly in EYL tests and examinations too.

In conclusion, by reading this book, as an academic, a student or a researcher, you will gain a thought-provoking, up-to-date overview and understanding of current theoretical issues in teaching English to young learners and how they relate to the classroom. As a young-learner teacher, you will deepen

your knowledge of how children learn a foreign language and be able to use many of the suggestions and recommendations to enrich and enhance your classroom practice. As a young-learner teacher educator, you will discover a wealth of ideas, which will enable you to make links between theory and practice to your trainees in a meaningful and digestible way. For everyone involved in, and passionate about, teaching English to young learners, this is an important book.

Carol Read
Primary ELT specialist
IATEFL President & Vice President, 2012–2016