

# An ABC of Changes in Primary English Language Teaching and Learning Over the Last 30 Years



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*A personal reflection and overview of changes in primary English language teaching and learning from the perspective of a long time practitioner, materials writer, teacher educator and recent IATEFL President.*



## A is for Attitudes

Thirty years ago, learning English as a foreign language in the primary years was mainly the preserve of elite private schools. In most countries, state school provision began in secondary school and private language academies had not yet begun to dream of the 'cash cow' that courses for younger learners would become. Back then, most teachers had neither the interest nor the competence to teach English as a foreign language to children, and the 'default' for all aspects of ELT, including syllabuses, methodology, materials, teacher education and research, was teaching adults. These days this 'default' is shifting and attitudes are changing too. Views about primary English language teaching (PELT), which typically used to associate the use of stories, songs, rhymes, games and other multi-sensory activities with an approach that lacks rigour, are on the wane. Research evidence and practitioner experience on a global scale increasingly underpin the seriousness of PELT as a highly specialised domain within the ELT profession.



## B is for Behaviour

Thirty years ago, it was common to hear teachers of children bemoan the bad behaviour of their pupils. So have things really got worse? While it would be wrong to generalise, it is the case that in many contexts, parents / caregivers have less time for quality parenting, due to economic and employment pressure, and teachers are frequently, and unrealistically, expected to compensate for this in the classroom. At the same time, the pervasive classroom model used 30 years ago (desks in rows, whole class teaching, lockstep progression) is still alive and well in many contexts, perhaps as education transitions to a more normalised and ubiquitous use of new technologies. In a developed world context, this model of teaching is out of synch with many children born into the fast-changing digital world of the 21st century and it is not surprising that it impacts negatively on their behaviour. Over the last 30 years, teacher education courses have increasingly needed to focus on the use of positive behaviour management strategies to work with challenging children, and being skilled and competent in this area is often the bottom line of being able to teach effectively in many primary English language classrooms.



## C is for Curriculum

Thirty years ago, an ELT curriculum for children was essentially a watered-down version of a structurally organised syllabus for adults with some concessions to age in the choice of lexis (see also Littlejohn, pp. 30-32). During the late 1980s and 90s, curriculum design briefly swung away from this and embraced a looser, more experiential, acquisition-based approach influenced by a combination of second language acquisition theory and mainstream primary practice in the UK. To date there has not been a corpus of child language to provide an evidence-based approach to primary ELT syllabus content, an area which feels plagued by circular professional 'group think'. With the advent of external young learner exams in the 1990s, exam boards initially looked to the existing coursebooks of the day to develop their exam syllabuses. Nowadays, with external YLE exams in ascendancy, the reverse is true and coursebook syllabuses are often derived from the exams. This circularity in the approach to syllabus design has sometimes reinforced the sequencing of certain 'sacred cow' structural items such as the past tense, or 'going to' which continue to be ordered and taught in a lock-step way following expected 'norms' which have little bearing on

the relevance, meaningfulness, purpose or even level of difficulty for the children who will use them. There are of course notable exceptions to this in some PELT course materials and in contexts where e.g. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or authentic children's literature underpin the organisation of children's learning.



## is for Digital

About 25 years ago I wrote a course book series for children which simply comprised a pupil's book, an activity book and a teacher's book for each level (Read & Salaberri, 1992). My most recent course for children comprises multiple print components as well as a range of integrated digital resources for teachers and pupils alike (Read & Ormerod, 2015). The world of ELT publishing is moving fast.

The familiar print-only course book series of yesteryear is rapidly giving way to blended or digital-only learning materials. These tend to make use of techniques from the world of computer games, such as gamification (see also Dodgson, pp. 64-66), which heighten the pleasurable and reward aspect of learning. They also take advantage of rapidly-developing adaptive learning software, which helps individual children progress in discrete, incremental learning steps and can also be used to build customised tests. Such digital-only materials are likely to be put together by anonymous teams of 'content creators' rather than traditional authors. At the time of writing, the extent to which digital materials are actually used in primary school classrooms varies hugely depending on the context but there is no doubt that it is increasing fast.



## is for Energy, Enthusiasm, Excitement, Engagement and Empathy

When I started out in PELT over 30 years ago, these five essential 'E's were crucial in helping me to 'survive and thrive' despite my lack of experience. More than 30 years on, they are still qualities that teachers of children need to be highly effective and successful, perhaps more than ever, and particularly with regard to:

- ▷ Energy – an ability to conserve your own energy and manage the children's;
- ▷ Enthusiasm – an ability to make the pleasure and challenge of learning infectious;
- ▷ Excitement – an ability to generate real curiosity and interest in learning;
- ▷ Engagement – an ability to sustain children's emotional involvement and persistence in achieving their learning goals;
- ▷ Empathy – an ability to create relationships of trust in which children know that you understand and care.



## is for Facts and Figures

The last 30 years have seen a continuous driving down of the age of introducing English as a school subject. This began in Europe and spread rapidly to other areas of the world such as Asia. The main driver behind this pervasive global trend has been the potential political and economic benefits perceived by governments and a public keen to give their children an educational edge for the future. Despite the fact that there is little research evidence to show tangible benefits of drip-feed, early language learning in formal class situations, and numerous practical pitfalls in the provision and delivery of PELT programmes as well as only limited results, this trend looks set to continue (see also Mourão, pp. 15-19). In Europe, three Eurydice reports (2006, 2008, 2012) show the rise from 10 to 17 EU member countries and, most recently, to a third of all European countries to implement teaching English to children of six or under by 2015 (quoted in Enever, 2015 and Mourão, 2015). Similarly in a recent global survey of 64 countries or regions (Rixon, 2013), nearly half had officially introduced English in Year 1 of primary school. Although not all the contexts surveyed offered English in pre-school, over half also reported that it was frequently taught anyway in response to parent / caregiver demand. The challenges of making the introduction of English in the early years worthwhile and successful continue to be manifold and include, among others, the provision and training of teachers and the establishment and assessment of suitable attainment goals (Enever, 2011, Rixon 2013).



## is for Gender

During the last 30 years, there have consistently been more women than men engaged in PELT and this is reflected in data from global surveys which report high rates of female respondents

(e.g. 80.4 per cent in Garten et al, 2011, 91 per cent in Emery, 2012). In the study of a primary teacher training course, which ran for 20 years from 1994-2014, it is also reported that out of a total of 640 participants, over 90 per cent were female (Ellis & Read, 2015). The reason for the high number of women engaged in PELT is not clear: it could be related to the profession having greater inherent appeal to women (Emery, 2012) or is perhaps due to the flexibility it frequently offers in terms of part or full-time employment. Either way, the fact that PELT is predominantly a female profession means that boys are less likely to have a teacher who also provides a gender role model. Women teachers need to be aware of this and to ensure that they include topics, strategies and techniques that will motivate and appeal to all the children they teach.



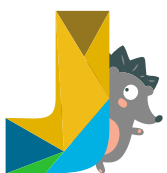
## is for Holistic Learning

Holistic learning aims to develop the ‘whole child’ and includes cognitive, metacognitive, social, cultural, affective, emotional, psychological and physical dimensions. The basic assumption is that learning is more effective when all aspects of the child’s development are involved. Over the last 30 years, the focus and emphasis on holistic learning in PELT has varied depending on the context and educational priorities of the day. However, there are frequently tensions between an instrumental approach which seeks to standardize, measure and test language performance in a narrowly-based, incremental way, and a more holistic approach, which recognizes children’s innate ability to learn through play and sees the benefits of early foreign language learning in terms of broadening children’s horizons, and developing multiple skills and competences as well as the beginnings of intercultural understanding, awareness and identity (Johnstone, 2009). One of the conundrums with a holistic learning approach is that progress and outcomes are difficult to measure and therefore tend not to be the focus of early foreign language learning research (Enever, 2015). However, this does not mean that these less easily measurable factors do not ultimately lie at the heart of teaching and learning success. As van Lier aptly says in relation to the driving forces behind good pedagogy: ‘Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean it isn’t there. Just because you can’t count it doesn’t mean it doesn’t count.’ (van Lier, 1996, p.199)



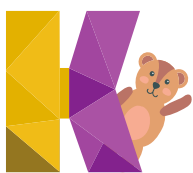
## is for Is Younger Better?

For much of the last 30 years, the cry of ‘younger is better’ has been a popular mantra behind the drive to lower the starting age of learning English despite the fact that evidence of success comes from vastly different contexts such as children in immersion conditions or bilingual families. There has been a considerable body of research and analysis (e.g. Singleton (1989), Marinova-Todd et al (2000)) which provides evidence as to why it is delusional to make an automatic connection between age and learning success in formal classroom situations where exposure to a foreign language is limited to two or three lessons a week. Writers such as Rixon (1999, 2013), Read (2003), Johnstone (2009), Enever (2011), Murphy (2014) have emphasised the wider educational benefits of early FL learning and provided insights into creating classroom conditions which are key to learning success. Johnstone (2009) acknowledges that while there are a number of age-related advantages to an early start, such as lower ‘language anxiety’ levels, older learners have the edge in terms of cognitive maturity, strategies and skills, and learn faster. Johnstone nevertheless maintains that an early start may well pay off in the longer term when both sets of advantages come into play. Irrespective of whether or not this is the case, the drive to lower the start age is here to stay and the debate as to whether it is worthwhile continues, with evidence from neuroscience increasingly becoming part of the overall picture too.



## is for Jack-of-all-trades

A jack-of-all trades is someone who is versatile and adept at many different kinds of work. This frequently applies to teachers of young learners who, in many employment contexts, need to be able to work flexibly with age groups ranging from pre-primary to upper secondary. Although there is arguably a shared core of knowledge and pedagogy, the differences in working effectively with such distinct age groups is vast. For example, the specialised skills set and competences needed to work with pre-literate 3-4 year olds are different to those needed for working with adolescents who are also experiencing the physical, social and psychological effects of puberty. When English language courses for young learners began to boom in the early to mid-1990s, many language teachers of adults found they had to adapt their skills to be able to teach children and teenagers too. It was also during this period that exam boards began to introduce qualifications for teaching young learners, such as the Cambridge CELTYL and YL Extension to CELTA, to meet the burgeoning demand.



## is for Kindergarten

30 years ago, it was rare to see children learning English in kindergarten except in bilingual schools. By contrast today, the implementation of English language teaching as part of the pre-school curriculum is on the rise in many contexts reflecting the trend to lower the starting age for learning English globally (see also Mourão, pp. 15-19). In some cases, the introduction of English in the early years is an ad hoc response to parent / caregiver demand rather than the result of national policy, and provision and practice vary considerably (Mourão, 2015). As with other areas of pre-school education, there is also often a tension between an approach based on academic instruction, which emphasises numeracy and literacy and aims to prepare children for primary school, and an approach which focuses on natural language acquisition and social constructivist learning through play and other multi-sensory and imaginative activities (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, Mourão, 2015). Since the early 2000s, a range of published ELT materials, frequently story-based and with loveable animal character puppets, have been produced for use in pre-school (e.g. Read & Soberón, 2002, Mourão, 2015). Although the pedagogical skills and competences required for teaching this age group are highly specialised, in practice the quality of pre-school teaching is patchy and it is frequently new and least experienced teachers who are assigned this role (Emery, 2012).



## is for Learning to Learn

There is a long history of integrating the development of learner autonomy into ELT that stretches back over more than 30 years. However, in the recent era of rapid technological and social change, there has been a resurgence of interest and increased focus on developing the awareness, skills, strategies and attitudes that will enable children to adapt and respond to new learning challenges throughout their lives. This focus is reflected in the national curriculums of some countries and regions, such as in Spain, as well as in children's course materials that have a strong emphasis on learning to learn (e.g. Read, 2009, Read & Ormerod, 2015) and in methodology books that help teachers to incorporate learning to learn as an integral part of their teaching (Read, 2007, Ellis & Ibrahim, 2015). The potential benefits of learning to learn are significant and considerable and 'include increased motivation; greater self-awareness; active involvement and commitment to learning; an open, curious, questioning attitude; good work habits; an organised approach to managing their learning; better concentration; improved recall and memory; greater collaboration, sharing and respect between peers; and becoming more responsible, reflective and independent learners' (Read, 2007).



## is for Methodology

In addition to advanced English language competence, PELT expertise includes 'the ability to implement age-appropriate methodological skills.' (Enever, 2015). Although there have been pendulum swings in general ELT methodology over the last 30 years, e.g. from PPP (Presentation, Practice and Production) to TBL (Task-based Learning), which have also influenced PELT, there has frequently been a gap between the competences needed by teachers of children and actual practice in many classrooms. No matter the approach, the ability to give children a meaningful learning experience, including rich exposure to language, opportunities for natural interaction and carefully scaffolded learning activities leading to creative outcomes through the use of e.g. drama, stories or content from other areas of the curriculum, requires highly specialised skills. The responses from a recent survey (Garton et al, 2011, quoted in Rixon, 2015) showed that the five most prevalent practices in primary classrooms around the world are repeating after the teacher, listening to CDs, pupils' reading aloud, playing games and songs. This perhaps reflects a reluctance to use more creative, interactive and, arguably riskier, classroom procedures and highlights an ongoing need for more in-depth, specialised teacher education that will equip PELT teachers with the multiple practitioner skills they need to do their job effectively.



## is for Neuroscience

The last 30 years have seen a range of popular misconceptions, or 'neuromyths' about how the brain works (Howard-Jones, 2014) which have also influenced approaches to teaching children. These include ideas such as right-brained people are more creative than left-brained people, students learn better when they receive information in their preferred learning style (visual, auditory or kinaesthetic), or that pressing two points under the right and left side of your collar bone makes your brain work better. Part of the reason for the so-called 'neurononsense' has been a lack of communication between

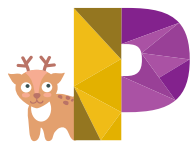


the two fields of neuroscience and education. However, this is rapidly changing in the development of the combined discipline of educational neuroscience. Consideration of neuro-diversity is also a factor in learner differences in relation to Special Educational Needs (see 'S' below). As teachers of children, we have much to learn from the field of educational neuroscience (see e.g. Zadina, 2014). Reports on research into brain plasticity through neuroimaging studies have also recently suggested that language learning may get more difficult with age (Johansen-Berg, 2013, quoted in Enever 2015). If this turns out to be the case, neuroscience may prove critical in the debate of whether an early start in language learning is a good thing after all.



## is for Other Change

One other key change that has impinged on language education for young learners has been the introduction of CLIL in a range of different contexts mainly, but not only, in Europe since 1994. Although Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and cross-curricular teaching were familiar terms and concepts before that time, the advent of CLIL has led to a more rigorous methodological approach to combining subject-driven learning with the development of language skills, including both BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) and CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency) (Cummins, 2001). CLIL is an umbrella term which encompasses 'strong' versions in which the language is the vehicle for teaching a school subject which is the main focus of lessons and assessment, and 'weak' versions in which content from other areas of the curriculum is integrated into language lessons but where language, whether overtly or not, continues to be the main priority. CLIL has many advocates (e.g. Coyle et al, 2010, Bentley, 2015) and also critics (e.g. Wannagat, 2007, Kirkpatrick, 2009). Its main influence on PELT, however, has been positive and led to a marked increase in interesting and engaging curricular content in general course materials as well as a greater focus on the integrated development of thinking skills that children need in all areas of their education.



## is for Policy

Over the last 30 years, policy decisions on foreign language learning in primary schools have been driven mainly by the desire of countries to produce plurilingual citizens who can operate in an increasingly globalised and digitally-connected world. However, difficulties have often arisen in the implementation of policies which are frequently top-down and hastily introduced without sufficient preparation or resources (see also Arnold and Bradshaw, pp. 47-49), or when the political mood of a country changes (see also Kuchah, pp. 43-46) and the carefully elaborated plans of one government are thrown out from one day to the next as the result of a general election. Typical difficulties in implementing policy decisions on foreign language learning in primary school over the years have related to the provision and training of suitably skilled teachers, the setting of achievable attainment targets and how to assess them, and the transition from primary to secondary school. Many of these problems have never been fully resolved and continue to exist in many contexts where English has been a compulsory subject in the lower grades of primary school for some years.



## is for Quandary

One of the main quandaries in PELT over the last 30 years has been whether, given the research evidence and ability of older learners to learn faster, it is worth doing at all. If, however, you share the view that learning a foreign language at a young age is not solely about narrow linguistic outcomes but brings broader educational benefits related to cognitive, metacognitive and affective skills as well as intercultural awareness and understanding (e.g. Johnstone, 2002, 2009, Read 2003, Enever 2015, Rixon, 2015), then there is another quandary. This relates firstly to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of pinning down and measuring intangible qualities such as affective skills or intercultural understanding (see also Cory-Wright, pp. 50-53) over time in order to make an evidence-based case. Secondly, it relates to how to develop assessment instruments and procedures which reflect broader benefits and more diffuse but no less valuable outcomes in an educational climate which increasingly seeks to standardise, measure and test language performance and to demand accountability in a narrowly linguistic-based way.



## is for Research

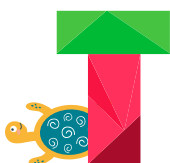
30 years ago, there was little published research on foreign language learning in primary schools with one or two notable exceptions such as a collection of papers from seven countries on teaching 4-8 year-olds (Freudenstein, 1982). In the 1990s, once an interest in PELT began

to spread and grow, there was a small, steady stream of research-based books on primary-level foreign language education, including a number of seminal collections such as two books colleagues and I used to refer to as the ‘green’ book (Brumfit et al, 1991) and the ‘grey’ book (Kennedy & Jarvis, 1991), as well as later in the decade and beyond, other volumes of collected papers (e.g. Driscoll & Frost, 1999, Rixon, 1999, and Moon & Nikilov, 2000). More recently, it has been extremely positive to see a burgeoning of growth in global surveys, research papers and publications on pre-primary and primary foreign language teaching and learning, which are contributing actively to our knowledge and understanding about what is effective in different contexts where PELT has been introduced. For example, the ELLiE project (Enever, 2011) is a transnational, longitudinal study, which gives insights into early foreign language teaching and learning in a range of European countries and provides an invaluable evidence-based guide to the positive outcomes as well as to the pitfalls. Two other recent collections of papers which also make invaluable additions to our knowledge and understanding of PELT around the world are Bland (2015) and Giannikas et al (2015).



## is for Special Educational Needs and Disability

Thirty years ago, there was little awareness of the extent and range of learning differences experienced by children and many of those with special educational needs and disability were likely to be excluded from mainstream foreign language lessons. By contrast today, there is considerably more awareness and understanding of different areas of special educational learner needs and the importance of access to learning as well as engagement and participation for all learners. There is also a commitment in many contexts to promote equality and diversity and to guarantee an inclusive learning environment, which is structured and organised to allow all children to feel safe and fulfil their learning potential (e.g. British Council, 2012). Special Educational Needs cover a wide range of areas related to cognition and learning, such as Dyslexia, to behavioural, emotional and social development, such as Social Mental Emotional Health (SMEH) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), to communication and interaction, such as Asperger’s Syndrome, and to sensory or physical impairment, such as visual or hearing impairment. Although language teachers are not usually specially qualified to work with learners with special educational needs or disability, there is an increasing awareness and motivation among primary language teachers to select, diversify and make accessible different language activity types, techniques, and strategies, and to use particular ways of managing, differentiating and scaffolding learning in order to work effectively and successfully with all the children they teach (see also Ellis, pp. 54-60).



## is for Transition

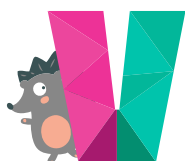
When I began teaching over 30 years ago, the lack of continuity and cohesion in the transition between primary and secondary school was a common problem. In the majority of cases, there was no contact between primary and secondary teachers or schools and, as well as the de-motivating effect of having to start again, children frequently experienced a sudden change to more formal language and text-based instruction which did not take their previous mainly oral/aural learning into account. Although there has been increased dialogue and contact between primary and secondary teachers and schools over the years, unfortunately it seems that this situation still exists today in many contexts (Rixon, 2013, 2015). As English is increasingly introduced in pre-schools, a further worrying problem is the lack of continuity in the transition from pre-school to primary school. Again, after an initial activity-based, holistic introduction to English through songs, stories, rhymes and play, children are in many cases suddenly required to start again and follow a more formal structural syllabus where an emphasis on aspects such as spelling and phonics may also have a similar de-motivational effect. In order not to overturn or negate the advantages of an early start over the course of a child’s whole school career, it is vital for schools and educators to ensure continuity of practice, which builds on children’s previous learning in a logical and developmentally appropriate way at each transitional stage.



## is for Use of Technology

The use of technology in foreign language teaching to young learners has been around for well over 30 years. As a child, I remember parroting German dialogues in our school’s brand new language laboratory and later, as a young teacher, booking my pupils into weekly sessions in the computer room, where “a mixture of chaos and joy usually ensued as the children, seated two to a computer, played simple vocabulary matching games or did gap-filling tasks ... based on previous work done in class” (Read, 2011). Of course the difference these days is that rather than being a special event

in a special place, as in the case of the ‘lang lab’ and computer room, the use of technology pervades every aspect of our lives, including language education, and offers an ever-expanding range of tools, software and resources to support and develop children’s learning in an integrated way both within the classroom and at home (see also Dumais and Trowbridge, pp. 67-69 and Hayes, pp. 61-63). As teachers, we need to remember that technology isn’t a panacea for learning and that the human qualities and face to face interactions that we bring to the classroom will continue to be the most important factor in teaching children effectively. At the same time, we need to have the flexibility and willingness to learn in order to constantly update and adapt our methodology and classroom practice to the opportunities for more individualised, self-regulated and creative learning that technology affords.



## V is for Values Education

Values education is to do with developing children’s awareness and understanding of human, social, cultural, ethical and global values and how to behave as a responsible, fulfilled citizen within the community. Values education has long been a strand in the national curriculums of many countries, e.g. Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship Education in the UK. It has also been integrated into ELT syllabuses in many contexts such as in Spain. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the integration of values education in international language materials for children. Typical areas covered include the importance of a healthy lifestyle, including personal hygiene, diet and sleep; looking after the environment including recycling and protection of endangered animals; personal values such as a positive sense of identity, harmonious social relationships, respect for diversity and responsibility for your own learning; family values such as gender equality and respect for differences (see also Ellis, pp. 54-60); and intercultural competence including racial tolerance and respect. The heightened importance given to values education in the 21st century reflects a concern to equip children with life skills and attitudes that will help them to navigate positively in a fast-changing, globalised world.



## W is for Where is PELT heading?

The short answer is that it’s hard to predict although it is likely that the quality of provision will continue to improve as we understand more about children’s foreign language learning in formal class situations from global research studies and insights from educational neuroscience. It is also likely that, despite the uncertain benefits, the trend to lower the starting age will continue downwards into pre-school due to populist government policies and parent / caregiver demand. The publishing drive to move from print to digital materials in PELT will also continue. It is also on the cards that many issues raised in this alphabet e.g. the transition from pre-primary to primary and secondary school, and the lack of suitably skilled teachers will continue to be problematic for some time yet. Given three wishes of where PELT should be heading I would include as priority:

- ▷ Greater provision for more in-depth, specialised teacher education equipping teachers with knowledge and understanding of child development as well as the multiple practitioner skills and competences needed to implement foreign language programmes effectively with children of different ages and levels. This will impact positively on the effectiveness of teaching, the production of high quality materials, the means and modes of assessment, and the status of the profession in the eyes of society. Although a few initial PELT training qualifications are available e.g. British Council Primary Essentials, CiPELT and Cambridge English CELT-P, it is of some concern that others, such as Cambridge’s CELTYL and YL Extension to CELTA, have been withdrawn approximately 20 years after their development.
- ▷ A more judicious, age-appropriate balance between holistic learning and formal academic instruction with learning levels, objectives and outcomes specified and assessed in ways that are compatible with broader educational aims, and not just limited to the formal testing of prescribed language items and skills. This would mean, for example, unpacking and re-examining the ‘A’ bands in the Common European Framework of References for Languages (CEFR) which are often used to express attainment targets in PELT but which in reality are neither suitable in domain, content or topics nor detailed enough to be truly useful.
- ▷ Closer collaboration between researchers and practitioners, so that those in a sometimes-called ‘ivory tower’ also understand and appreciate the everyday issues and challenges of those at the ‘chalk (or IWB) face’, and vice versa. This would allow for more constructive dialogue and enable those at the sharp ends of both theory and practice to work critically and creatively together in order to improve the quality of language teaching provision in primary schools globally.



## is for Xpertise

So how much has changed over the last 30 years in terms of the expertise needed to be a highly effective language teacher of children? Seen from the learners' perspective, the results of a survey of 200 children between the ages of 6-12 at a primary school in Madrid showed that children wanted their teachers to be 'kind, caring, funny, patient, listens to you, makes you work, tells you off if necessary but doesn't get angry or shout' and that older children in the survey (10-12) valued a teacher who 'explains things well, is patient, treats everyone equally, has no favourites, and doesn't go on and on' (Read, 2000). In addition to these qualities identified by children themselves, language teachers of children need to have excellent organisational and interpersonal skills, as well as creativity, flexibility, the 'five E's' (see E above), positive attitudes, a love of children, an understanding of how they develop, and a passion for teaching. They also need an ability to design and sequence age-appropriate activities and tasks, to support and scaffold individual children's learning, to develop children's thinking and communication skills, to provide timely and constructive feedback, and to assess learning. All in all, it ever was and still is a pretty tall order. The modes and means may have changed (e.g. to digital coursebooks and class sets of iPads) but the knowledge, skills, attitudes and awareness needed have remained fairly constant. There is, however, perhaps a greater need than ever to keep constantly up-to-date, to be a reflective practitioner willing to review, adapt and change your classroom practice, and to have the ability to critically evaluate evidence from research and what so-called 'experts' say.



## is for Young Learners

The term 'young learners' has been widely used ever since the early 1990s and the start of the global trend to lower the age of learning English. However, it is an umbrella term that is often confusingly used to mean either all learners up to the age of reaching their majority (usually 18) or more narrowly, learners from their first year of formal schooling to the end of primary school (e.g. approximately 6 – 12-years-old). As I wrote on my blog (Read, 2011), 'the term obscures the enormous physical, emotional, psychological, social and cognitive differences there are in children and young people of different ages, and ... the wide range of different skills and methodological approaches that their teachers need to teach them'. I also went on to suggest that it would be more helpful to 'specify the age ranges ... in relation to the educational systems to which children belong ... for example, infants, pre-primary, kindergarten or early years, followed by primary, middle school or lower-secondary, secondary and upper-secondary'. Ellis (2014), who has proposed the use of similar terms, has also said that this 'will avoid over-generalizations, ensure clarity and consistency, and raise the global status of the 'young language learner' profession'. While use of the term 'young learners' is so ingrained, it is probably here to stay, it is nevertheless crucial to be aware of the need to accurately specify who is being referred to when it is used.



## is for Zebra

Zebra is the black and white-striped animal that comes at the end of a child's pictorial alphabet. Here it feels important to stress that this account of changes in PELT over the last 30 years should not be seen in black and white but rather as reflecting one personal view and perspective. The perceived reality of educational changes and how they are interpreted vary hugely depending on the context, background and experience of the person describing them, and I am aware that mine have influenced everything in this alphabet, from the choice of letters and topics to the views expressed. Nevertheless, I hope that it may be helpful in giving a snapshot of major changes that have occurred in foreign language teaching of English to children during the last 30 years as well as a taste of some of the achievements, challenges and future still to come. ■

**Carol Read** has over 30 years' experience in ELT as a teacher, teacher trainer, academic manager, materials writer and educational consultant. Carol's main specialisation is in primary language teaching and she has published extensively in this area including the award-winning title *500 Activities for the Primary Classroom*. Carol's latest publication is a six-level primary course, *Tiger Time*, with integrated digital resources for teachers and children published by Macmillan Education. Carol was a member of the YLT SIG Committee and Joint Editor of its newsletter from 1998-2006, and President & Vice President of IATEFL from 2012-2016. You can find out more about Carol by visiting her website [www.carolread.com](http://www.carolread.com) and contact her at [carol@carolread.com](mailto:carol@carolread.com)



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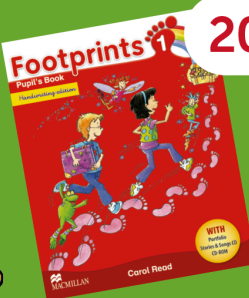
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