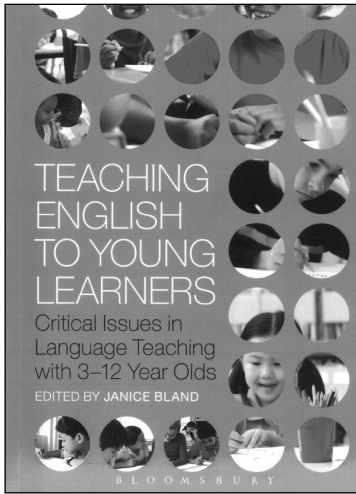


Teaching English to Young Learners: Critical Issues in Language Teaching with 3-12 Year Olds

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Teaching English to Young Learners: Critical Issues in Language Teaching with 3-12 Year Olds is a compilation Janice Bland has carried out from 15 different experts in teaching English to Young Learners (EYL). These authors present many different aspects related with theoretical as well as with practical issues that affect this particular area of teaching. Although chapters are written individually, there is a perspective that gives coherence to both matters, that is, raising awareness about some critical issues related to teaching English to young learners, while revealing the range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and professional qualities that are needed to teach English to children successfully.

Starting on the steadily increasing debate related to early language learning and when to introduce FLL in schools, Enever tries to shed further light on the advantages and disadvantages of an early start. On the one hand, following those who support that an earlier start is a key factor that offers a better final achievement level for the learner, the author denotes how Johnstone points out the ease young children show in acquiring the sound system of a new language, whereas referring how Halliwell highlights their ability to grasp meaning based on paralinguistic features already learnt in their mother tongue, or children's ability to be creative with language which is linked to their capability to guess and tolerate ambiguity as part of the process of meaning making. On the other hand, the lack of metacognition may place them at a disadvantage in making sense of how the new language works, while they might not have developed yet the range of learning strategies and skills that may be transferred to the new language they are learning.

Anyhow, an early start may contribute to the development of intercultural understanding, empathy, self-awareness and respect for others while widening children's horizons, as supported by Driscoll and Simpson, who also state that a language awareness approach to language learning "can develop linguistic and cultural sensitivity which allows learners to perceive language as a product and part of culture".

However, many of the advantages of an early start may get lost if teachers are not properly skilled. Carol Read points out the existence of a “gap between the competences and qualities” that are needed by these professionals, revealing the need of more in depth specialized teacher education courses for young learner teachers in order to “increase knowledge, understanding and awareness of the processes of children’s foreign language learning”.

In accordance with this issue, a lack of appropriate teachers is denounced by a recent worldwide survey carried out for the British Council in 2011 by Rixon. The starting age for English within the primary school system has been lowered in the past few years, leading to teacher supply problems in many countries where “there were either not enough teachers or not enough teachers with the background and training that were judged in each context to be appropriate”. Consequently, the official standards for this kind of professionals may be lowered down in order to fulfil the needs, hence “individuals who do not strictly fit the criteria are accepted as teachers of English”.

Furthermore, in countries like Spain where students have little (or none) contact with English outside school, the teacher becomes “the major source and catalyst for children’s development in English”, as stressed by Rixon, who insists in the high level of skills and language competences teachers need, so as to provide the optimal conditions for language learning, because “the mere fact that the learners are young will not be enough for language learning success”.

In relation with this, some authors focus on what methodology might suit best young learners. We can find then, a wide research about CLIL, immersion or bilingual approaches in which the foreign language is the medium of instruction in school. Kersten and Rohde highlight the high effectiveness of immersion programs worldwide, sharing Lazaruk’s cognitive research which determines that bilingualism heightens mental flexibility and creative skills, enhances metalinguistic awareness and arises greater communicative sensitivity. These core aspects are shared with a CLIL approach, as supported by Bentley, who claims the challenge it is for CLIL teachers to plan content and language learning outcomes, hence the need to count on highly skilled professionals.

Likewise, Read exposes the limitations teachers may encounter with some English language teaching materials which offer limited opportunities for language exposure, vocabulary in isolation, stories which are in fact situational sequences rather than well-constructed stories, or CLIL content which is not such. Therefore, she deems there is an urgent need to change some of the currently available published EYL language teaching materials as well as tests and examinations. For instance, Bentley argues that some English Language Teaching (ELT) publishers include CLIL topics in English language course books meaning to learn language through cross curricular input. A comparison of

course book materials for primary ELT and CLIL is illustrated in a table, concluding that the latter do not achieve the aim of CLIL in terms of promoting learning by doing, active and cooperative learning that encourage the development of communicative or cognitive processes.

Similarly, the usage based approach to language acquisition highlights the role of context and formulaic language and, as Read supports, how lexical and grammatical knowledge can emerge through engaging with input, whereas keeping in mind how to provide children with what Tomlison considers a priority: “through an engaging and enjoyable experience of English”. This way, he coincides with Bland or Mourao who focus on the importance of a rich exposure to language and how to provide opportunities for natural interaction and meaningful repetition in engaging contexts, leading to creative outcomes, whether through the use of drama, play, oral storytelling, picture books or poetry.

Janice Bland supports that the young learners' need for language patterns with an emphasis on meaning can be achieved through adequately chosen poetry for children whose “lexical patterns and grammatical categories can be a template for the future, as long as they are contextualized and meaningful”. She also illustrates the important role of oral storytelling, encouraging teachers to develop their creative talk skills by engaging in these stories. Finally, completing the use of narrative in the EYL classroom, Mourao raises awareness of the potential of picture books with young learners, which relies in “the active engagement that takes place between learner and book, which results in participation with and use of language.”

Considering the critical issues we can find in this book, it may be very useful for teachers as well as teacher trainees since it offers a wide overview of current theoretical and practical topics related with teaching English to young learners. Some authors may contribute to help expand one's knowledge on how children learn a foreign language, whereas one may follow many of the suggestions given by other experts in order to heighten their classroom practice. The keystone to get the most out of its reading is making connections with one's experience in a way that one will surely find answers to many questions, or arise curiosity and awareness about other matters that they might not have realised yet when trying to teach English to young learners in the most successful way.