

# Teaching English to Young Learners: not just for primary school teachers



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## **Caroline Linse looks at issues raised by the worldwide boom in teaching English to increasingly younger learners**

A conversation at a recent professional conference meandered to the topic of teaching English to young learners. My fellow conference attendee told me that he didn't know anything about teaching English to children but had been asked to teach English language improvement courses to primary school teachers in Asia. He saw it as a big problem and was concerned about the challenges of teaching English to young learners.

He is one of many individuals who, for the first time, is confronting issues that I have been grappling with for my entire career. Individuals, true TESOL professionals who have never thought about the teaching of English to young children, are suddenly pondering issues relating to teaching young pupils. The impact on the profession is enormous and stretches far beyond the confines of the primary school classroom.

With a few exceptions, teachers who specialize in English and are trained to teach upper secondary, adults and university students do not attend the same academic institutions as those trained to work with primary school and nursery school children. In other words, for the most part, the teacher education institutions that prepare specialists to work with young children are separate from the higher education institutions that train English language specialists. Consequently there are teachers who *either* know how to work effectively with young children *or* have a high level of English language fluency.

Several different groups of TESOL professionals are being impacted by the move, if not stampede, to educate young learners.

### **Classroom teachers**

On the one hand, many individuals who specialized in English and were trained to teach English to older learners suddenly discover that they are managing crayons instead of advanced learner's dictionaries. Due to the expansion of programs for young learners, both native and non-native speakers of English who intended to work with older learners are finding themselves thrust into classrooms with young ones. Some are delighted to be working with energetic youngsters and feel right at home singing songs, playing games and helping

children develop a love for the English language. Others are frustrated because they do not feel prepared to work with children.

On the other hand, there are scores of very effective primary school teachers all over the globe who have been told that they must work on improving their English language skills because they must now teach English. Working with children is stressful enough without having the extra burden of learning a foreign language and learning how to teach. These teachers often are required to go to take language improvement English classes after school, on weekends and during the summer.

### **Publishers and editors**

Although there have been course-books for young learners for years, only recently have publishers started in earnest to create professional materials for teaching English to young learners. Publishers are also recognizing the fact that the traditional notion of a children's ELT course-book will not adequately address the needs of today's young learners. There is a real range in the level of responsiveness among publishers. There are some publishers and editors who cannot change their mindset and fervently adhere to their ELT adult-oriented belief system and talk about how adult methods can merely be adapted to teaching young children. But we shouldn't forget the truly savvy editors and publishers who come from higher and upper secondary education and realize that they need to devote a great deal of time to conversing and learning from teachers who are at home sitting on little chairs and talking about the sounds animals make.

### **Teacher educators**

There are huge numbers of teachers who must be trained to provide appropriate English language instruction to children. The types of training are two-fold: in methodology and in language improvement. One of the big problems is that the trainers usually have a background in English and teaching English to older learners OR in the approaches used to teach young learners but not in both areas. Teacher Educators who lack experience working with young learners cannot demonstrate an approach and honestly say,

'I did something like this with ten year olds.'

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Or

'The next time I do this with children I will need to do ...'

### Exposure to children

Professionals, who are involved in different aspects of language education of young children, would benefit greatly from experiences working with groups of children. Nothing is more humbling than

having a group of nine year olds take control of a lesson. Children are not merely little adults. In addition, I feel that teacher education programs should at the very least include a module that addresses the needs of young learners. Future teachers should be aware that at some point in their career they may need to address the educational needs of young learners.

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## Wait-time: how to deal with silence in the classroom

Does the silence when a student does not know the answer, takes too long thinking about something to say, or is even too shy to say a word make you feel uncomfortable?

What should you do? Should you just skip this student? Ask a more willing peer to answer instead? Provide the correct answer? These are some things some teachers might think of doing, as a result of anxiety, high level of stress, or simply because they want to maintain a brisk pace in their lessons. But in fact, none of these actions is advisable on the spur of the moment.

You have planned your lesson, anticipated problems, come up with possible actions to take, and then ... all you get is ... profound *silence*. You will probably think: 'Should I wait?', 'How long?', 'What if the other students get bored?', 'But I need to keep the my lesson lively, dynamic.'

I found it extremely rewarding when I decided to focus on this issue in my lessons. As Nunan (1990:193) says: 'the issue of wait time is obviously important in language classroom, because of the greater processing time required to comprehend and interpret questions in a second or foreign language.'

So, I decided to record some of my lessons and spent some time analysing them. I chose mixed groups with both slow and outstanding students. What I noticed was that my wait time lasted on average two to three seconds! Is that enough for a slow student who might have understood what you have just said or explained, to process the information and respond to it?

Even if students receive the best instructions – clear, concise, relevant, and focused on their needs – and they know what they are expected to do, their oral production will not be satisfactory unless they

are given enough time to think about what they are going to say, and to reflect on and analyse the information they are exposed to.

What can you do, then? The key word is *patience*. Try to extend your wait time, from three to five seconds, for example. Do not show your students you are eager for them to answer. Show confidence when waiting a bit more for students' contributions to the lesson. Soon, you and your students will internalise the process and see how helpful this 'tool' can be.

Do not expect to implement and internalise this change in one or two lessons. Recording your own lessons every now and then will make it easier for you to spot the points you need to work on.

Needless to say, the outcome of this experience was highly positive for my students. Soon after my implementation of a longer wait time there was as a result, an improvement in their participation, that is to say, the average length of students' responses had increased and their spoken production extended. The students who usually preferred silence because of their shyness also felt encouraged to try to take part in the activities.

Moreover, there was also an increase in the quality of verbal contributions to the lesson, as students had more time to think, reflect and respond. Wait time is an excellent resource at any level of EFL lesson. If all we want as educators and facilitators is to lead our students to improvement, then this is really worth trying.

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### Bibliography

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