



ROUTLEDGE
HANDBOOKS



The Routledge Handbook of Teaching English to Young Learners

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Materials for early language learning

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Introduction

Since English language teaching (ELT) was introduced into grade school curricula, the onset of instruction has usually been around age eleven or above. However, the early 1990s saw a push in Europe to lower the onset of foreign language (FL) instruction, and the same trend has since been observed in many countries outside Europe. In the early twenty-first century, ELT found its way also into pre-school and even into nursery classes. Following the European framework, Teaching English to Very Young Learners (TEVYL) refers to three- to six-year-olds and Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) refers to seven- to 12-year-olds. The practice of introducing ELT to ever younger age groups raises concerns not only about pedagogy but also instructional materials, which include the coursebook and any other materials used in the classroom. Often the internationally marketed ‘global’ coursebooks for upper primary school have been modelled after materials for older learners, and are increasingly often geared towards standardised language tests. Yet, a coursebook-based approach is not necessarily developmentally appropriate in the pre-school and lower primary school classes, in particular.

TEYL programs range from enrichment programs, where children receive English instruction for perhaps one hour a week, to immersion programs, where some academic content is also taught in English. English as a foreign language (EFL) here refers to programs where children learn English as a subject, whether for one or more weekly hours. English as a second language (ESL) refers to partial or total immersion programs, whether children live in an English-speaking country or not. Needless to say, with such a wide range of aims, a wide range of instructional materials should be available. TEVYL must also take into account the fact that the youngest learners have not yet developed literacy in their first language (L1), and that children’s linguistic development, even in their L1, varies widely from child to child depending on the richness of their linguistic environment. In addition to the above variables, materials should also consider the level of teacher qualifications and experience in teaching young and very young learners.

‘Materials’ here includes coursebooks and any supplementary materials such as workbooks, flashcards, posters, cassettes, CD-ROMs, videos, dictionaries, worksheets and supplementary

readers, etc. Needless to say, teachers around the world often also prepare their own instructional materials, either because there are no funds for coursebooks or to supplement commercial materials. There is such a vast array of teacher-made materials from flashcards to worksheets and bulletin-board posters that they are beyond the scope of this article.

Historical perspectives

Birth of TEYL materials

Although TEFL has a long history in secondary schools, TEYL is relatively new. In the early 1900s, the US policy was to assimilate immigrants as soon as possible, and immigrant children were immersed in English-only classrooms (with few exceptions) until the mid-1960s. However, since the 1950s, large population shifts have resulted in considerable numbers of linguistic minorities in North America and Britain (Howatt 1984), and 1966 witnessed the establishment of TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) followed by IATEFL (International Association of Teaching English as a Foreign Language) in 1967.

In the UK, Schools Council *Scope* project was developed to teach English to immigrant children, with *Scope 1* published in 1969, followed by two more levels in 1972. Howatt (1997, p. 275) describes how

Scope broke new ground in English language teaching by bringing together the EFL tradition of the linguistically organized syllabus (structured patterns, controlled vocabulary, etc.) and the primary school tradition of activity methods which required the children to use the new language co-operatively to make puppets, charts, models of various kinds.

Examination of TEYL materials published after *Scope* reveals that the approach has had a long-lasting impact that can still be seen in some EFL courses published in the UK, such as *Stepping Stones* (Ashworth and Clark 1990), *English Together* (Webster and Worrall 1992), *New Stepping Stones* (Ashworth and Clark 1997) and *Tops* (Hanlon and Kimball 2008). *Let's Learn English* (Dallas and Iggulden 1990), *Way Ahead* (Ellis and Bowen 1998) and *Blue Skies* (Holt 1999) represented a more traditional structured approach but with communicative flavor, possibly easier for a teacher teaching large classes.

Increasing numbers of immigrant children in American schools in the 1970s brought about innovations in teaching English to children in the country. In 1971, Hap Palmer published *Songbook: Learning Basic Skills through Music*, aimed at children learning ESL. Carolyn Graham's (1978) *Jazz Chants for Children* was based on the notion that chants provide exposure to natural intonation patterns and promote listening and speaking skills. Other innovations followed. Story Experience activity was developed for Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado in 1979 and involved rhymes, physical action, acting out story scripts and other activities (Richard-Amato 1988). *Random House book of poetry for children* (1983) aimed to teach children English through poetry, *Games for language learning* (Wright, Beteridge and Buckley 1984) presented a variety of games and *Storytelling for children* (Wright 1984) (in its 9th impression in 2004) promoted storytelling. Some of these popular approaches eventually found their way to ESL coursebooks published in the USA, albeit with minor modifications.

American primary level ESL courses have followed a communicatively oriented, yet structured approach, with a variety of songs, rhymes, TPR and short-story scripts in *Kids*

(Walker 1989c) and *ESL* (Addison Wesley 1989b). *Parade* (Herrera and Zanatta 1996) and *New Parade* (Herrera and Zanatta 2000) added content connections and hands-on projects, while *Amazing English* (Walker 1989a) incorporated multicultural content reflecting the multicultural characteristics of American society. These courses remained popular throughout the 1990s. *Backpack* (Herrera and Pinkley 2005) integrates vocabulary, grammar and the four skills and has also Little Books for levels 1–3 and Magazines for levels 4–6. *Hip Hip Hooray!* (Eisele et al. 2004) is structured around updated and abbreviated classic stories that develop in the course of the lesson units. At the time of this writing, both *Backpack* and *Hip Hip Hooray!* were in second edition. The earlier courses were often accompanied by pictures cards, posters and audiocassettes, while the more recent courses come with VHS/DVD, CD-ROMs and companion websites.

Story-based materials

One of the early studies on young learner materials was Michael West's study of his *New Method Series*, which he piloted in 1923–1925 with Bengali children in India (Howatt 1997). The focus of his approach was reading of simplified stories, which West believed would eventually enable children to use the language themselves (West 1937). In one of his experimental classes, pupils made two-year gains in reading and one-year gains in vocabulary in only 141 class hours (Tickoo 1988, p. 297). The readers became a commercial success and were used for a number of years in India, then-Ceylon, Palestine, Persia, Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda (Smith, n.d.).

Reading and storybooks were also central in 'book flood' studies conducted by Warwick Elley and others based on an approach developed in New Zealand in the 1970s. The approach entailed shared reading of numerous storybooks and related follow-up activities. Significant gains were noted in reading and listening comprehension, with positive effects having carried over to other subject matter areas (e.g., Elley and Mangubhai 1983; Elley 2000).

In the 1990s, story-based instruction gradually found its way into TEYL and has gained popularity steadily as attested by the many research projects and programs carried out in different parts of the world. In 1997, Opal Dunn founded the *RealBook News* (www.realboos.co.uk), in 1998 Ghosn's (1999) story-based, thematically structured *Caring Kids: Social Responsibility through Literature* was awarded the Mary Finocchiaro Award for Excellence in the Development of [unpublished] Pedagogical Materials from TESOL, and in 2013 *CLELE (Children's Literature in English Language Education) Journal* was launched. The motivating power and low cost are some advantages of story-based instruction. Children's literature can work even in contexts with limited resources, especially if one Big Book version is used. These are large, illustrated books that can be placed on an easel and seen by a group of children as the teacher reads the story while pointing at the words.

Diversity of TEYL and TEVYL materials

In the early twenty-first century a push for TEVYL began, with increasing number of countries introducing English in the lower primary school as well as in pre-school (see Enever 2011; Rixon 2013). Publishers quickly followed with courses for the very young learners. *Pockets* (Herrera and Hojel 2009a) is aimed at children between the ages of three and five, while *Little Pockets* by the same authors is promoted for two-year-olds.

Since the 1980s, there has been a significant increase in TEYL materials and since mid-2000 TEVYL materials. Arnold and Rixon (2008) mention 36 titles aimed at TEYL, while

a brief examination of three well-known international publishers' online catalogs of 2016–2017 showed 44 titles designated for pre-primary and 75 for primary school. In addition to commercial print materials, there are numerous web-based resources for TEYL, such as <https://learnenglishkids.britishcouncil.org>, www.learninggamesforkids.com and www.eslgamesplus.com, as well as language learning apps for children offered by <https://elearningindustry.com> and others.

YL materials selection varies, with some countries prescribing one textbook for each grade level, while in others a wide array of textbooks is available for schools to choose from, either freely from the market or from a government-approved list (Arnold and Rixon 2008). The global TEYL books published in the UK and the USA have been adopted by many countries, while others have begun to produce their own materials specially commissioned and written to the specifications of a ministry of education or other educational authority. International materials – often called ‘global coursebooks’ – have also been adapted to local needs with some modifications (Arnold and Rixon 2008). In many cases, teachers make their own materials, as there is no budget for books, while others make materials to supplement the coursebook. As Rixon (2013, p. 32) notes, ‘there is a very wide range of solutions to the provision of class materials and this reflects the resources and often the political conditions in each context’.

The well-designed coursebook has many advantages in the classroom: it provides a clear syllabus, a comprehensive teacher’s guide and motivating content (Harmer 2001), as well as appropriately sequenced and structured lessons that save teacher’s time regarding lesson planning (Halliwell 2006). Nearly 30 years ago, Sheldon (1988) argued that that assessment of coursebooks is not well researched, although the ELT publishing business is a multimillion pound industry. It seems things have not changed much, especially in regards to TEYL and TEVYL coursebooks.

Enever (2011, p. 29) argues that publishers have been ‘slow to respond’ to the needs of the YLs and their teachers. She suggests that this is likely due to ‘high costs, the uncertainty of the market and the well-established tradition of coursebooks for older learners’. It might also be due to ‘a closed and possibly vicious circle’, as Rixon (2009, p. 4) argues, with international examination syllabuses being based on coursebooks, which in turn are based on examination syllabuses. With the demands of accountability, standardised tests for young learners are increasingly popular. For example, approximately 150,000 children sat for the UCLES Test for Young Learners in 2000 (Cameron 2003).

Critical issues and topics

What are ‘Good’ materials for TEYL and TEVYL?

Numerous suggestions regarding successful ELT materials are available and the key points can be summarised as follows. Good materials should reflect topics relevant, interesting and meaningful to learners, language that is contextual and natural, and focus ought to be on meaning rather than form of language, with skills integrated and concepts recycled (Richard-Amato 1988). Materials should provide repetition of input and opportunities for learner output, be culturally appropriate (Watt and Foscolos 1998) and in the case of TEYL and TEVYL be also age appropriate in terms of content, approach and expectations (Ghosn 2013a).

In the wake of the push for ever earlier TEVYL, publishers are turning out coursebooks even for nursery and kindergarten children. Yet, teaching children as young as five and six (let alone two or three) using a coursebook is not necessarily appropriate. First, children

at this age are not yet literate in their first language, although they might have acquired a sizeable vocabulary and know how the language works. Second, children at this age do not respond well to formal, teacher-fronted and coursebook-based instruction implied by the materials available at the time of writing (Ghosn 2017).

For young children, who may have little intrinsic motivation to learn a new language, especially in EFL contexts, materials must also be interesting enough for children to be motivated to engage in the lessons. Jalongo (2007) argues that motivation and interest have a profound influence on learning, and Artelt (2005) considers interest as a key form of intrinsic motivation. There are two types of interest; individual interest and situational interest (Jalongo op cit.), the latter playing a particularly important role in TEYL and TEVYL.

Situational interest has been studied for over twenty years, and according to Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000, p 152) certain features in texts can trigger situational interest: texts that are easy to understand, present unusual, novel or surprising content and feature characters and topics with which learners can identify, and/or involve high levels of activity. In a classroom, it is more difficult to meet the personal interests of all learners, which can vary widely from dinosaurs and comic books to puzzles, Pokémons and Barbie dolls. However, Hidi and Harackiewicz (ibid.) also found situational interest can evoke personal interest, meaning that content of lessons can trigger students' personal interests.

Instructional approaches

Cameron (2003, p. 105) argues that the spread of TEVYL 'is not a minor change that can be left to YL experts, but a shift that will have knock-off effects for the rest of ELT'. She further cautions against 'over-reliance at primary level on literacy skills in English' (2003, p. 106) at the expense of listening and speaking because 'some children will always begin to fall behind or fail – not because they cannot learn to speak English, but because they need more time to master the complications of reading and writing' (ibid.). Her cautions are well placed, as the majority of internationally available TEYL courses feature little or no explicit instruction in word study or reading skills.

'New TEYL curricula have generally emphasized communicative competence' (Garton et al. 2011, p. 5), leading to 'some form of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or task-based Learning and Teaching (TBLT)'. However, the CLT syllabus originated in Western countries and was aimed at adult learners. Thus, while it may work well in contexts with small classes and ample resources, it might not be realistic in countries with large classes, limited resources and possibly a shortage of teachers experienced in teaching young learners. CLT might also not work in countries where different classroom cultures prevail. For example, in highly hierarchical cultures, where the teacher is perceived as the source of knowledge with students respectfully listening, it might be difficult for both teachers and students to adapt to CLT. The following quotes from two teachers who were trying to use a communicatively oriented coursebook illustrate this point. The first quote is from Japan and the second from Lebanon:

If I do group work or open-ended communicative activities, the students and other colleagues will feel that I'm not really teaching them. They will feel that I didn't have anything really planned for the lesson and that I'm just filling time.

Is the above also true in Korea? *(Richards and Lockhart 1994, 108)*

When I first started teaching at [the school], I tried to follow the teacher's book and I think students liked it . . . but anyway, the coordinator told me stop doing it because

Have you experienced parent complaints that go against recommended methodology?

some parents were complaining. They said my class was out of control and that I wasn't teaching children anything, and that they were just talking to each other and playing games. So, now I don't do that anymore.

(Ghosn 2004, 114)

One must wonder how the typical coursebook activities involving pair- and small-group work can be realised in such situations. The following dialogue shows what happened in one Lebanese fifth-grade class. Children are expected to talk about their favourite seasons and seasonal activities. The text provides options of swimming, sailing, bike riding, playing in the autumn leaves and planting flowers.

- T: OK. Rami and Boutors. Please do the conversation.
 S3: [Reading] What is your favorite season?
 S4: [Reading] My favorite season is spring.
 S3: Why?
 S4: [Reading] I like warm, rainy days.
 S9: [Reading] What is your favorite season?
 T: OK. Now Rania, you answer him.
 S10: [Reading] My favorite season is winter.
 T: Why do you like winter?
 S10: Because it's cold.
 T: Because it's cold or because you like to play in the snow?
 S10: I like to play in the snow.
 T: Now Hani and Zeina, you do the conversation.
 S11: [Reading] What is your favorite season?
 T: [to S12] And don't say winter!
 S12: [no response]

(Ghosn 2003, pp. 295–296)

The intended pair-dialogue became just another drill with the teacher correcting form errors.

The above episode brings to attention another potentially problematic issue in the global coursebooks: culture-specific content. Some content in the TEYL coursebooks reflects a pre-supposed shared reality, which might not exist. For example, in the above case, the only activity options that were relevant and familiar to the children were swimming and bike riding.

ELT materials developed in the USA reflect the multicultural characteristics of the country, while UK-developed materials reflect the British culture. Although one might argue that these books are 'local', they are, in fact, marketed globally. Incorporating aspects of Anglo culture, although undoubtedly a key aspect of any ELT program, may not be appropriate at the very early stages of TEVYL outside the target language culture. If lesson content features topics very unfamiliar in the learners' home culture, young children may not be able to relate to the concepts and may even find them confusing. Unfamiliar cultural content may also result in awkward classroom interactions even at the upper primary classroom, as the above episode illustrates and as shown by Ghosn (2003, 2004, 2013a, 2017).

During the author's teacher development sessions in the Middle East over two decades, TEYL teachers, especially in rural areas, have voiced their concerns about cultural content in their coursebooks, with which they themselves are not familiar. When children act out coursebook dialogues that feature unfamiliar concepts, the interaction is unauthentic and drill-like, and perhaps not very meaningful for them. Locally developed materials can better be tailored to the local context and needs.

Have you found culturally-inappropriate content in course books?

When developing materials for children, one must consider children's cognitive development and also their psycho-social needs. For example, maintaining focused attention is a demanding skill, which children develop gradually during the pre-school and elementary school years. The more salient the lesson content, the greater the likelihood that children will maintain attention (Kail 2010), while unfamiliar or too-abstract content makes it more difficult for children to maintain attention. Memory is another important factor for learning, and only around age seven do children begin to utilise memory strategies that improve remembering, such as rehearsal and repetitive naming of the information to be learned (*ibid.*). This has implications on what young children can be expected to remember from one lesson to another, especially if the lessons are a week apart.

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) (Copple and Bredekamp 2009) calls for a learning environment reflecting the predictable sequences of growth observed in children, and this applies also to language and literacy development, whether in L1 or L2. Children must be exposed to experiential, interactive and appropriately challenging learning experiences, which should allow plenty of opportunities for play, especially dramatic play, which contributes to children's cognitive (Golinkoff et al. 2006), psycho-social (Berk et al. 2006) and language and literacy development (Christie and Roskos 2006). Play also develops children's communication skills, vocabulary and storytelling skills, and promotes development of attention and concentration. Thus play would have an important place also in the TEVYL classroom and should be considered in materials development for this age group.

In DAP classrooms, children interact physically with people and their environment and engage in hands-on activities, materials and interactions, constructing their new knowledge, which builds on their prior knowledge (Beaty 2009). Needless to say, this goes contrary to the coursebook-driven instructional practice promoted by publishers of TEVYL and some early TEYL materials.

Current contributions and research

Evaluation of materials

Bearing in mind the central role a textbook plays in the classroom, it is surprising that research on the quality of TEYL materials and how they are actually used in the classroom is rather limited. Some research has emerged that reviews and evaluates available TEYL textbooks and other materials. Ellis (2017, p. 216) aptly notes that young learners are not very 'adept at treating language as an object that needs to be studied, analyzed, understood and memorized' and calls for 'plentiful input, interactive input-based tasks and text-creation materials' (*ibid.*). Citing an internationally marketed course for young learners as an example, he argues that published TEYL materials 'sadly' (*ibid.*) do not meet the criteria, pointing out that 'text-manipulation work' dominates.

Arnold and Rixon (2008) mention 35 TEYL courses published between 1992 and 2007, and review 16 of them in detail. International textbooks produced by three large international publishers accounted for 19 of the 21 titles intended for international distribution, and of locally targeted books five were also produced by these international publishers. In other words, the pedagogical philosophies of a few major publishers determine the content and approach of the global coursebooks.

Although Arnold and Rixon (*op cit.*, p. 48) note that the coursebook authors' stated rationales for their materials were 'all in line with current YL thinking', they also point out that the materials fell into two main categories: those which promoted 'structural/grammatical'

preparation for specific examinations, and those which were more activity based with less focus on ‘linguistic content’. They also found the cultural content of the materials to be Western-specific and suggest that ‘many teachers’ guides rely too much on the written word alone’ (ibid., p. 51) rather than guide teachers in the use of available technologies.

Dickinson (2010) examined a primary school course from an international publisher intended for use in Japan. The series adopts a method similar to the traditional present-practise-produce approach and adheres to a controlled grammatical syllabus. Dickinson notes this restricts what students can actually say during the question-and-answer dialogues, which have been a staple in TEYL courses, and as the earlier cited dialogue illustrates. Dickinson (2010, p. 12) also found some of the content ‘irrelevant’ to learners in his context, a lack of ‘diversity of registers’, as well as some ‘socially inappropriate content’ (such as calling someone fat).

At the time of writing, the field of TEVYL is still new, so it is not very surprising that there is little research evaluating materials. Hughes (2014) reviewed courses aimed at children between the ages of three and seven; two for three- to five-year-olds; one for four- to five-year-olds; and first levels of two other primary school courses. She points out that comparing TEVYL courses is complicated because of differences in style, methodology, target market and the clarity of type of approach advocated. She found considerable variety regarding the ‘density and complexity of the pages’ (ibid., p. 336) in the student books. Yet, her review is positive overall, although she questions the value-based approach in one course aimed at three- to five-year-olds.

Ghosn (2014) reviewed the first level of two series aimed at children ages three to five, one global course and one aimed at the Middle Eastern market. Although themes and topics were fairly age appropriate with some exceptions, some of the activity pages in the regional coursebook were inappropriate in terms of image sizes. For example, some images that children were expected to count were so small that it would be very difficult for a child who still needs to point to the objects to count them. The focus of both courses was on form rather than meaning, and children were expected to produce complete sentences in the very early stages. She found a clear lack of alignment with DAP.

Arnold and Rixon (2008, p. 45) surveyed 76 teachers in 28 countries worldwide for their views on materials they use. The authors note that ‘EYL provision is so varied across sectors and cultures that it does not make sense to seek a “typical” use of materials’. According to their questionnaire, the great majority of the teachers responding were happy with their materials, and the authors speculate that this was because they had participated themselves in the selection. The characteristics valued by teachers the most were materials being based on fun and enjoyment, with emphasis on aural/oral language, and promoting interaction. Least-valued characteristics were a heavy emphasis on grammar or vocabulary.

Describe how you approach TEYL materials selection and use.

Materials in the classroom

The central role of the textbook in the classroom is well demonstrated in research. Barton (1994, p. 181) has argued that ‘much of schooling can be characterized as talk around texts’, in a process referred to as ‘instructional conversations’ by Tharp and Gallimore (1988, p. 11). These comments refer to classroom interactions in general, rather than just language classroom interactions. Typically, the teacher initiates the interaction (often with a question), the student responds and then the teacher evaluates or gives feedback, a sequence that puts ‘the teacher in the position of mediator between student and text’ (Martin 1999, p. 40).

Although extensive research over the years has examined interactions in the language classroom, much of this research has focused on upper primary levels and above. Less research is found from TEYL classrooms and what teachers and learners do with the available materials, and the research tends to be comparative in nature. Chen-Ying Li and Seedhouse (2010, p. 288) compared interactions around story-based lessons and traditional lessons in Taiwanese primary schools. They found ‘more variations of interaction patterns’ and ‘a lot more pupil initiations, expressing a wide range of language functions’ during story lessons than the standard choral drills and task-based activities. During story lessons children talked about the story content and made predictions and engaged in storytelling. Their study resonates with Ghosn’s (2001) study in six fifth-grade English classes, where she found more interactive discourse around stories and content area topics than around traditional language practice. In other words, the coursebook activities do play a key role in classroom interactions, and the textbook is in an authority position. Teachers reported they were expected to cover everything in the book, and teachers frequently referred to ‘they’ (presumably meaning the authors) when initiating an activity in the textbook. Expressions similar to the following were recorded in all six classrooms:

Teacher 6: They want us to practice conversation here.

Teacher 1: Let’s see what they want us to do here.

Teacher 3: They always give us problems to solve.

Teacher 2: They want us to circle the answers here.

(Ghosn 2001, p. 220)

How can we stop the
textbook from leading
our classes?

Clearly, the textbook is in control, at least in the case of these four teachers. However, Ghosn (ibid.) found also differences in how interactions around distinctly different lesson activities were realised. While question-answer dialogues produced limited student output, story- and content-based lessons generated richer student output and more negotiated interactions between teachers and students. In the following episode, the teacher is inviting the pupils to discuss Tom Sawyer’s fence-painting event using the illustrations as a guide:

Teacher: Let us listen to Batul’s suggestion about the first picture.

Sa: Tom Sawyer said for her ‘oh, you are you are painting’

Teacher: Painting

Sa: Painting and I’m and I eating and playing

Teacher: Yes, I am free, you are busy. I am eating I’m not working free to go whatever where ever I like and you are here to whitewash. We’ll see.

Teacher: Sabine

Sb: I think I think so that that Tom saw the apple, so he said for his Ben

Teacher: To his friend, yes

Sb: Friend Ben that (unintelligible) can you give me the apple and I will let you to to to wash the [several students calling out] Wash wash!

Teacher: Wait, wait, listen, yes. She is saying something important and the others, shh.

Sb: and I will let you

Teacher: Have a turn

Sb: Have a turn to paint.

Teacher: To paint. Maybe, maybe. Very good.

(Ghosn 2001, p. 174)

Although children are struggling with the language, they are eagerly participating, and the discourse is more interactive in quality than in the earlier seasonal activity, which had a very drill-like quality.

Little research exists at the time of this writing on how materials are actually used by teachers in the TEVYL classroom with children between the ages of three and six, and what kind of interactions can be observed around the texts. One report from Poland (Szulac-Kurpeska 2007) describes pre-service teachers' attempts to engage five- and six-year-old kindergarten children in English. The teachers found the most successful activities to be those involving a lot of movement, as well as chanting, role play and music, which kept children actively engaged in the lesson. The most difficult aspect according to participants was maintaining children's attention.

If you teach YLs, reflect on your own interactions with them. How could you improve?

Materials and language learning outcomes

The longitudinal Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE) study assessed seven- to eight-year-old language learners' achievement over a three-year period (Enever 2011). The ELLiE study did not compare different materials but examined teacher characteristics and out-of-school factors and learner achievement. Perhaps because primary school ELT is a relatively recent practice, little research has been conducted on the relationship between different language teaching materials and learning outcomes. One strand of research has been focusing on storybook reading and language learning.

Reading comprehension

Several experimental studies point to the benefits of storybook reading on development of second language skills, particularly reading, writing and vocabulary. Replication of the 'book floods' cited earlier have produced significant gains in both reading and listening comprehension in Sri Lanka (Kuruppu 2001), Singapore (Ng and Sullivan 2001), South Africa (Schollar 2001; Elley et al. 1996) and Poland (Sadowska-Martyka 2006). All these studies involved hundreds of children and numerous storybooks. Several smaller studies have also produced similar results (e.g., Aranha 1985; Ghosn 2003b). Studies with kindergarten or pre-school aged children have produced similarly positive outcomes (e.g., Eade 1997; Tunnell and Jacobs 1989). Some retrospective studies also support the use of storybooks in TEYL, including Ng (1994), de'Ath (2001), Singh (2001) and Ghosn (2001; 2006; 2010). These studies point to the importance of reading for young language learners, yet very few TEYL coursebooks focus on reading.

Vocabulary acquisition

Vocabulary learning presents a challenge to young second language learners and for their reading development in particular. Word knowledge means many things, as Nation (1990), Cameron (2001) and others have pointed out. Knowing a word implies conceptual knowledge, whether receptive or productive; morphological knowledge which helps determine meanings of inflections and derivational affixes (Nagy and Scott 2000); grammatical knowledge; semantic knowledge because words are interrelated (Nagy and Scott 2000); pragmatic knowledge which helps to know how to use a word correctly in a real world-situation; and phonological knowledge to be able to pronounce a word or to recognise it in spoken and written language. Developing such complex word knowledge is a gradual process

happening over time, as children hear, see and use a given word. The more often the target word is encountered, the more likely it is learned (Beck and McKeown 1991; Laufer 2005), and Nation and Wang (1997) suggest that a minimum ten encounters are necessary for likely acquisition. Elley (1997, p. 6) argues that ‘much of our vocabulary development is a result of incidental learning from silent reading’. His argument is supported by research of Verhalen and Bus (2010), Ghosn (2010; 2013a) and others.

Writing

Writing is a skill given very little attention in TEYL coursebooks, with tasks consisting mainly of filling in the blanks, compiling lists and composing short messages and letters, and serving merely as an exercise function. Samway (1987, p. 3) argued in the 1980s that even ‘the most advanced levels of most ESL texts for elementary grade children present writing in an artificial way’. When Ghosn (2013b) examined four TEYL courses produced between 2000 and 2010 by the largest international publishers, she found writing tasks still very limited. For example, in the highest level of a five-level course, there were a total of 72 lessons but only 20 writing tasks in all, of which ten were letters or poems. Teachers’ guides revealed no explicit writing instruction, as if children just somehow pick up the skill on their own. As Graves (1983, p. 43) argues, children need modelling in order to develop as writers so that they would not perceive writing as magic, as if ‘we only need to hold the pen and a mysterious force dictates stories, poems, and letters’. This is of particular concern in ESL contexts, where children must develop academic literacy and take written tests. Research suggests that when young language learners write, their writing resembles their instructional texts (e.g., Hudelson 1989; Huie and Yahya 2003; Ghosn 2007, 2012).

Recommendations for practice

In the early 1980s, Tongue (1984, p. 113) proposed alternatives to the then-traditional, tightly controlled language practice typical in primary ELT. He proposed ‘content-based extracts’, content drawn from local social studies curriculum and ‘concentration on games, puzzles, verses, stories, competitions, quizzes and simple dramatisations, together with songs and music, drawing, colouring’ as ‘particularly suitable perhaps for the first years of primary’. Since then some of his suggestions have found their way to newer TEYL courses.

In the TEVYL classroom, learners should engage with content that is interesting, meaningful and motivating for them, as motivation and interest have a profound influence on learning (Jalongo 2007; Artelt 2005). Meaningful material is learned faster and remembered better than material less meaningful (Anderson 1995; Mayer 1996). Similarly, novel, emotionally relevant or personally significant information gets the learners’ attention and gets it processed to the working memory better (Barkley 1996). Ullman (2001) found that when learning L2 syntax, young children employ their procedural memory, which implies they learn grammar by repeated exposure and practice *in context*, not by explicit instruction in rules. This poses a challenge because young foreign language learners are typically exposed to the target language only for short lesson periods, possibly only once or twice a week (Enever 2011). The instructional materials and pedagogical approaches must therefore provide sufficient repeated exposure to target language vocabulary and structures for learning to happen. According to Laufer (2005), several exposures to a word are required for it to be remembered, and according to Nation and Wang (1997) a minimum of ten are

required. In the early TEVYL classes, nursery rhymes, songs, physical activities, games, illustrated picture books and big easel books will provide enjoyable repetition of both vocabulary and structures and would also be more developmentally appropriate choices as children are naturally drawn to them. With the rich range of high quality illustrated children's books in English, it will be possible to structure a TEVYL syllabus solely around such books – especially in Big Book format – and nursery rhymes and songs with physical movement (such as *Teddy bear, teddy bear, turn around, This is the way we wash our hands*, and *Hokey pokey*). This approach, described in Ghosn (2013b) has proven successful in UNRWA¹ schools catering to Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon since 2011. In brief, developmentally appropriate TEYL and TEVYL materials will provide plenty of opportunities for meaningful, contextualised activities and experiential learning through rhymes, songs, chants and games, as well as interesting content (Cameron 2001; Ghosn 2017; Hughes 2010).

Primary school TEYL materials, although focusing initially on aural/oral language, should gradually incorporate basic reading comprehension strategies, word study and spelling instruction, and modelling of the writing process. The language presented ought to reflect more how people actually use language in daily discourse. One particularly troubling aspect of TEYL courses has been the delay of past tense verbs in the lower levels, which does not reflect language in use. For example, a brief search of the British National Corpus (www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk) yielded 195,306 instances of *said* but only 67,135 of *say*. The absence of the past verb tense also denies children the opportunity to talk about things meaningful to them, such as interesting experiences they had or stories they have heard, which would enable them to 'create their own personal history' in the new language (Escott 1995, p. 20). Although we know that children's L2 development occurs in a sequence, with past-tense forms *emerging* after present, it does not follow that we should not *expose* them to past-tense verb forms early on. A good example is the verb *ate* in Eric Carle's classic *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, where it appears seven times, while *eat* does not appear at all. Many teachers of young second language learners have observed children effortlessly pick up the word even when they are not familiar with its present tense form. As regards culturally unfamiliar content, it is better introduced gradually, once children have acquired language that allows them to talk about familiar concepts around them. Difficulties may arise when young language learners and their instructional texts inhabit different worlds, as Gregory (1998) and others have shown.

Future directions

Research needs to examine teachers' and learners' perceptions about the materials and how teachers actually use the materials in the classroom, and what kind of discourse the materials generate. There is also a need for longitudinal studies on learning outcomes as regards learners' ability to use the language beyond passing a test. With the apparent rapid spread of TEVYL, it will be very important to assess the longitudinal benefits of the practice, and to ensure, through DAP, that all children can succeed and nobody is left behind because of TEVYL.

Authors of TEVYL materials should break away from the coursebook model and take into consideration the developmental needs of very young language learners. In TEVYL teacher handbooks with rhymes, songs and games, possibly with accompanying Big Books, would be more aligned with DAP than a traditional coursebook.

What are some children's songs, rhymes and chants that you are familiar with? How could they be used in teaching?

Further reading

- 1 Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
This book provides a theoretical framework for how children learn languages in the classroom and practical suggestions on how to structure lessons.
- 2 Ghosn, I.-K. (2013). *Storybridge to second language literacy. The theory, research and practice of teaching English with children's literature*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
This volume outlines the theoretical benefits of children's literature for L2 language learning, presents an overview of research studies from around the world to support the theory, and provides classroom vignettes of actual classrooms.
- 3 Tomlinson, B. (Ed.). (2016). *SLA research and materials development for language teaching*. New York: Routledge.
An important book that focuses on the interaction between second language acquisition (SLA) and materials development. Chapters comprise position statements, SLA theory driven materials, materials evaluation and recommendations for action.

Related topics

Motivation, technology in the classroom, mobile learning, syllabus, differentiation

Note

- 1 The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

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