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Teaching English in the Primary School

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Klett Lerntraining

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Introduction

1 Why have we written this book and who have we written it for

Our motives to write a book about the teaching of English in the primary school are manifold.

To begin with, there is the generally accepted view that teaching young learners requires an approach that is tuned to their particular learning needs. General methodologies on the teaching of English (MÜLLER-HARTMANN & SCHOCKER-V. DITFURTH 2004) do not provide the pedagogical content knowledge needed to do justice to this particular group of learners even though, of course, there are insights that overlap and are valid for both secondary and primary education.

Meanwhile, all countries across Europe have introduced foreign languages – mostly English – as a mandatory subject in primary education. There is an enormous demand for the basic knowledge that is needed to qualify teachers appropriately to teach groups of young learners with particular learning needs all across Europe (see ENEVER 2005). We have therefore included the European perspective in our publication by discussing European developments in education policy and by referring to relevant research. But at the same time we *focus* on the particular conditions under which English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is organized in the educational context of German state primary classrooms (→ [ch. 1](#)).

Wherever available, we have based our arguments on available research, which has been particularly lively and expanding in the last few years (→ [ch. 2](#)). LYNNE CAMERON's *Teaching Languages to Young Learners* which

appeared in 2001 (Cambridge University Press) has been a seminal and comprehensive publication in English to explicitly summarize relevant research for children learning a foreign language. It has been quite a while since then, and, therefore, her book does not include relevant research that has been published in the last couple of years. While CAMERON's book is an important study, it is also of limited value for our specific teaching-learning context, because of a diversity of definitions that say what a 'young learner' actually is. While CAMERON (2001) writes her book for learners between five and twelve years of age and ELLIS (2004), referring to the international EFL context, says that 'young learners' "*cover children and teenagers from kindergarten to school leaving age, representing a range of developmental differences and cognitive stages*" (ELLIS in ELLIS & MORROW 2004: 1), we refer to children from the time they start primary education (in grade 1 or 3) until they transfer to secondary school, which is either after four or six years of primary schooling, depending on the state government's education policy. To discuss the special needs of 'very young learners' at pre-school level we have included a separate chapter in our book (→ [ch. 14](#)).

As regards the way we have organized content within the chapters, we have tried to proceed inductively, that is, by illustrating and discussing principles on the basis of primary specific materials, tasks or teaching experiences from primary classrooms. We would like to have included more examples of how principles may be put to practice – which we could not do, given the limited space that an introduction to such a varied field of knowledge provides. We therefore refer to relevant readings and materials that may be used to supplement the topics we have covered.

The book may be used to prepare pre-service students, students in their internship and teachers in service for the specific competences they need to cope with in this particular teaching-learning situation. We hope the book will contribute to a lively discussion as to what counts as appropriate professional qualification in competence-based teacher education (HALLET 2006).

We have decided to publish our book in English for various reasons. Not only do we believe that there is a potential readership interested in the subject-matter all over Europe (see above). We also believe that teachers and beginning teachers should be able to discuss issues to do with the teaching of English in English so that they are prepared to join the professional discourse and may share and profit from participating in it. Furthermore, teachers should have a chance to contribute to the knowledge-base from their experiences and questions in their particular contexts. This knowledge-base is constantly expanding and finds expression in a multitude of professional circles and forums on the teaching of English to young learners.

2 What is our experience with primary EFL?

All three of us have had experience in the teaching of primary EFL in primary classrooms in Hessen and Baden-Württemberg. We have also supervised primary EFL students of our universities during their teaching practice internships at local primary schools and offered seminars on the teaching of English at primary level across Europe. We have developed an online MA course that qualifies students to teach English organized in blended learning format, “E-LINGO – Didaktik des frühen Fremdsprachenlernens” (www.e-lingo.de). The course involves a classroom research component. Marita has co-authored a course for primary EFL called *Magicland* (Langenscheidt/Longman). She is also co-editing a journal on primary EFL, *Grundschulmagazin Englisch* (Oldenbourg-Cornelsen Verlag), Michael is a member of the BIG advisory group, and has been responsible for several small scale research projects in the state of Hesse.

3 How have we structured our book?

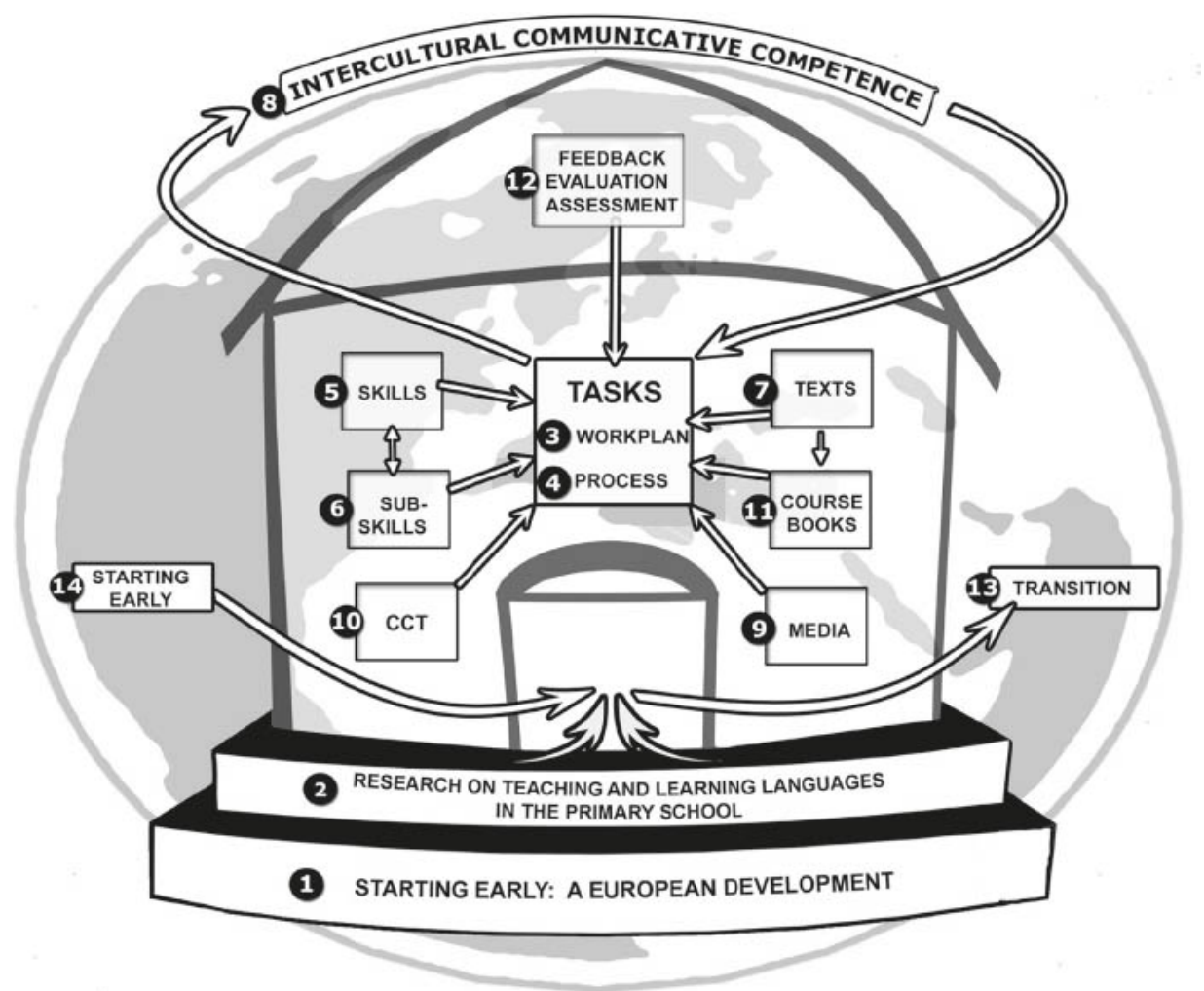
We thought it would be best to structure the comprehensive relevant knowledge for the teaching of primary EFL by providing readers with an illustration. We have chosen the image of a house (= the primary school) with stairs at its foundation, leading into the house (= explaining why the teaching English at the primary level is relevant and what we know from research about how foreign languages are learned at this level → ❶, ❷). The primary school is part of the world in which we live. This world influences us in many ways and tells us, why and how foreign languages are learned as well: our house has windows and doors that open up to this world from which our learners come from and from which they bring certain needs, motives, attitudes and competences. We also prepare them for the world to cope with the multiple demands that global discourse requires. We have therefore placed the purpose of teaching EFL, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), in the roof of our house (→ ❸). ICC is developed by way of tasks which we have placed at the center of your book (→ ❹, → ❺). We have dealt with them in two separate chapters which focus on the features of good learning tasks as a work plan and on how teachers and peers may support successful task completion in the process of doing them. All of the other areas connected to the teaching and learning of foreign languages at this level contribute to this knowledge. We have therefore grouped them around our big task window.

4 Some words of thank you

Finally, we would like to thank a few people who have supported us in writing this book in many ways.

Many thanks to Günter Gerngross, who has consented to include results of his work he has done in collaboration with Marita on the quality of course books (→ [ch. 11](#)) in our book. Günter and Marita have co-authored a module for the M.A. course “E-LINGO – Didaktik des frühen Fremdsprachenlernens” on this topic. Much of our chapter on the quality of course books is based on this module.

We owe special thanks to Otfried Börner for giving us critical feedback from an experienced practitioner's point of view. Many thanks go to Christina Bailey, who made sure through her professional editing that we did not deviate from standard language use. It was a pleasure for us to cooperate with Jonas Thiel who designed the figure for our introductory chapter. Finally we would like to thank Sebastian Schmidt, Vera Biedenkopf, Nadine Kalbfleisch, and Annika Schäfer for their meticulous work on the bibliography and the resources of [chapter 15](#).



The structure of our book

1 Starting early: A European development

1 The classroom as a focus of interest

Teaching and learning a foreign language is a complex process: it is situated in a classroom where many factors influence what children can learn. SCRIVENER (1994: 202), for example, has developed an observation task to make student teachers aware of the many factors that help students learn a foreign language. He mentions *the room* (i.e. seating, sight-lines, space, light, equipment), *the activities* (i.e. kinds of activities used, nature of student involvement, balance of students and teacher doing things), *the teacher* (i.e. his or her personal qualities, rapport, the atmosphere generated by him or her), and *the learners* (i.e. their motivation, their active involvement). It is therefore very difficult to make general statements about this environment which has had characteristics such as uncertainty, complexity, uniqueness, instability, and value conflict attributed to it (SCHÖN 1983). We therefore need to be aware of the fact that no two classrooms are alike and that what works in one classroom may not necessarily work in another.

Features of the primary EFL classroom

As CAMERON (2001: 1) says, some differences between adult and secondary classrooms are immediately obvious: “[C]hildren are more often enthusiastic and lively as learners. They want to please the teacher [...]. They will have a go at an activity even when they don’t quite understand why or how. However, they also lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult. Children [...] do not have the same access as older learners to meta-language that teachers

can use to explain about grammar or discourse. Children often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native-like accent.” Research by EDELENBOS ET AL (2006: 67ff.) confirms this. They show clearly that the benefit of introducing a modern language at the primary school level lies in the positive attitudes and motivation which children develop and sustain. CAMERON concludes her list of primary-specific learner characteristics with a cautious note, saying that generalizations may hide the diversity of the children. *Heterogeneity* is the constituent feature of primary classrooms: there may be children who are more outgoing than others, and others who prefer to be silent. You find a multitude of individual learners and learning styles as a result of their different personalities, cultural backgrounds, and preferences as well as their social, intellectual, or linguistic development (see also LIGHTBOWN & SPADA, 1999; → [ch. 3](#)). Therefore your choice of topics, materials, activities and teaching strategies depends very much on who your learners are. This is why we will introduce you to the idea of *classroom action research* or *practitioner research* in the next paragraph, which aims at helping teachers develop the quality of their teaching and their students’ learning in their particular learning-teaching contexts.

Developing the quality of learning in classrooms

Results of findings of empirical studies that have looked into how languages are learned at the primary level (→ [ch. 2](#)) can never be directly *transferred* to improve teaching in a particular classroom, because there are no general solutions for complex practical situations such as the teaching and learning of a foreign language in a classroom. These situations demand specific solutions that may be best developed and tested within a particular classroom by the teacher and his or her learners who are *the* constituent factors that determine the quality of learning. Furthermore, a simple *transfer* of research-based ideas is impossible for yet another reason: “If we ask what we know with certainty about language learning, the answer is likely to be disappointingly small [...] We are talking here of a complex and inaccessible psychological phenomenon, and can only hope for a concept which has plausibility, not a fact which has certainty” (PRABHU 1989, chs. 1

& 3). We therefore subscribe to an approach to professional development that enables teachers to find out – in collaboration with their learners and their colleagues – if an idea, an activity or an experience that has been reported from elsewhere – has the potential to improve the quality of learning in their particular classrooms. This is best done by doing classroom-based action research projects (see BURNS 2005; DÖRNYEI 2007, ch. 8; LEGUTKE & SCHOCKER-V. DITFURTH in press 2008). There is not enough space to make you familiar with the concrete proceedings of this approach here. In general terms, it is “*a process in which teachers examine their own educational practice systematically and carefully, using a range of data collection and analysis techniques*” (KAREN JOHNSON, TESOL 2008). We believe that you need to be aware that the quality of learning in any classroom is shaped by the participants’ perceptions and understandings and their definition of the social situation. But let us first turn our attention to what influences primary EFL learning on a ‘macro level’, that is anything ranging from European language policy, institutional affordances or constraints or teacher qualification programs.

2 Starting early: A European trend

One of the most remarkable changes in European education in recent years has been the universal spread of early language learning programs throughout Europe since the 1990s (see CHRIST 2003; EDELENBOS ET AL 2006: 13; ENEVER 2005: 179). This trend appears to have been linked in part to the opening of borders across Europe and the enormous increase in economic and cultural exchanges as by-products of globalization. According to EDELENBOS’ ET AL study (2006: 19–20), which is based on data from 30 countries, most of which was retrieved in 2003/2004, the situation in Europe is as follows:

“[A]pproximately 50% of primary pupils learn at least one foreign language [...], a second foreign language in primary education is compulsory in four countries (Luxembourg, Estonia, Sweden and Iceland).

[... M]ost member states expected that all pupils would have to learn at least one foreign language. All learners in that year were obliged to start in primary school, with the exceptions of Belgium (the Flemish speaking community outside Brussels), the United Kingdom and Bulgaria. Two foreign languages are compulsory in four EU states (Estonia, Luxemburg, Sweden and Iceland). [... As regards the choice of language], the data [...] clearly show the dominance of English as a foreign language in primary education.”

Policies and rationales: the Europeanization of starting early

The teaching of English within primary schools is globally increasing but: *“Variability is a key characteristic of the practice of ELL. Many of the problems associated with ELL are related to provision factors, such as class-size, amount of continuing professional development, support for teachers, availability [...] of appropriate materials, amount of time made available and teachers’ L2 proficiency”* (EDELLENBOS ET AL 2006: 22). This means that in the classroom there are important differences in the quality of language learning due to differences in the frequency and duration of language classes, in the funding of the programs, in the consistency of teacher education programs, and in quality assessment. *“Contextual factors of implementation at school level will finally be what defines the value of a policy”* (ENEVER 2005: 180). In Germany, the federal education system has resulted in a variety of different state government programs on the basis of different theoretical assumptions and curricula (see SEKRETARIAT DER STÄNDIGEN KONFERENZ DER KULTUSMINISTER 2005).

It has been criticized that as a result of the hasty introduction of foreign languages in primary schools in some German states, insights from empirical studies have only been considered in part, if at all (see EDELLENBOS ET AL 2006: 147 ff.; SCHMELTER 2007: 86; BRUSCH 2000a for a survey of different approaches to teaching languages at primary level). This is also what RÜCK (2004: 22) assumes when he says that views on early language learning are often dominated by *“vorwissenschaftliche Ansichten etwa zur ‘optimalen Phase des Grundschulalters’, zur ‘Imitationsfähigkeit von*

Primarschülern’ oder zum ‘spielerischen Lernen’”. It has also been criticized that the time of exposure provided by schools (in most states two lessons a week) is not enough to achieve satisfactory results (SAUER 2000).

3 Starting early: Reasons why

Younger does not necessarily equal better

The commonly shared *reasons* why early start programs have been implemented during the last years are therefore interesting. These reasons differ considerably from those given when languages were first introduced at primary level in the 1970s. These earlier attempts were based on the assumption that “younger is better.” In other words, that an early start is more likely to ensure competency in a foreign language because a young child is endowed with certain language learning abilities that will allow him or her to become a more proficient user of the language. But there is a lack of empirical support for the “younger is better” hypothesis (see SINGELTON, 1989 and ROOS 2007: 14–22). There are many additional factors which need to be considered, such as the quality of resources, the quality of teaching, the time of exposure, as well as issues of motivation or cognitive development. But to this day, education policy uses the factor ‘age’ to argue for the introduction of foreign languages at primary level: *“Die Länder begründen die Aufnahme des Fremdsprachenlernens in den Grundschulunterricht im Wesentlichen mit der veränderten Lebenswirklichkeit und den für den Spracherwerb günstigen Lernvoraussetzungen der Kinder dieses Alters“* (SEKRETARIAT DER STÄNDIGEN KONFERENZ DER KULTUSMINISTER 2005: 2). LIGHTBOWN AND SPADA (1999: 164–5) qualify this assumption as just another “*popular idea about language learning*” for which research evidence is lacking. “[R]esearch doesn’t show any particular age when there’s a sudden change in attainment across the board – either for phonology or grammar. And there is also evidence of [a minority] of learners achieving native-like proficiency well after any purported critical age.” (McMORROW 2008,

quoting from MOYERS 1998, n.p.) This is why MOYERS (2003) concludes that attainment in second language learning is ‘multiply determined’. Young learners’ particular qualities may be useful for learning and should be recognized, but they still do not justify a simple equation.

Foreign language learning is a basic human right

This argument is related to no less than an individual’s quality of life: Languages are a prerequisite for participation in social and cultural life, they are, as LEWIS says, a “*personal asset [...], an important tool of self-definition, a powerful creator of identity*” (LEWIS 1993: 50). One could say language is a condition of inclusion in processes of mobility and change. It is the declared European goal to create a trilingual community with English as the lingua franca that Europeans may use when they communicate with each other. “*The ability to understand and communicate in other languages is a basic skill for all European citizens*” (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES 2003). The chances of creating a Europe of multilingual citizens will be greatly improved if citizens have access to language learning at primary school or before. Monolingual speakers do not have the chance to participate in cultural discourses which are already multilingual. Between one half and two-thirds of the world’s population is bilingual to some degree, and a significant number are multilingual or as you can also say, polyglots. Diversity of languages and of cultures is increasingly being seen as a good and beautiful thing in and of itself. Each language has its own way of seeing the world and is the product of its own particular history. All languages have their individual character and values, and all are equally adequate as modes of expression for the people who use them. English is the lingua franca and learning it helps people connect.

Foreign language learning supports the development of further competences

The potential to encourage a positive attitude applies to learners from all cultures, whether native or non-native, and should be used as early as possible. This is why the COUNCIL OF EUROPE “*is concerned to improve the quality of communication among Europeans of different languages and*

cultural backgrounds. This is because better communication leads to freer mobility and more direct contact, which in turn leads to better understanding and closer co-operation [... which] contributes to the promotion of democratic citizenship” (CEF 2001, xi-xii). There is also evidence that an early start in foreign language learning enhances wider cognitive development, intellectual flexibility, and is believed to support literacy development in the L1 (MARSCHOLLEK 2002, 2003).

Finally, early start FLL opens the curricular space needed to introduce at least a second and in many cases also a third FL before graduation from high school. This is in keeping with the recommendations of the action plan of the COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY (2003). It calls for learning “*the mother tongue and two other languages*”. Early start foreign language learning provides the stepping stone for language awareness and is the gateway to other languages. It is the beginning of life-long learning. The arguments that back early start programs are powerful. It therefore does not come as a surprise that foreign languages are considered to be part of a child’s basic literacy education claiming the status of a core subject. BRUSCH (2000 b: 34) has rightly allocated English the rank of a “*vierte Kulturtechnik*” with the same status as reading, writing, and mathematics. There has been a controversial discussion on the role of English as a foreign language as compared to the role of other foreign languages in education which we will not present in detail here; the controversy being that the dominance of English might prevent the development of multilingual citizens. It has therefore been argued that receptive multilingualism is an alternative option to using English as lingua franca (see for example FINKENSTAEDT & SCHRÖDER 1992; MEISSNER & LEGUTKE 2007). We do not subscribe to this view but argue for English as lingua franca while at the same time supporting the learning of other languages. In Germany, this view is mirrored in the curricula of all the federal states, as all early start FLL is outcome and proficiency based. There are standards which define the competences learners have a right to achieve. States and communities are legally required to provide the contexts and means to show that this right is being provided. Whichever first foreign language is chosen, schools