



Annika Kolb · Marita Schocker

Teaching English in the Primary School

A task-based introduction for
pre- and in-service teachers

ISBN 978-3-7727-1549-5



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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Impressum

Annika Kolb, Marita Schocker
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1. Auflage 2021
Das E-Book folgt der Buchausgabe: 1. Auflage 2021

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D-30159 Hannover
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www.friedrich-verlag.de

Redaktion: Barbara Jung, Berlin
E-Book Erstellung: Friedrich Verlag GmbH, Hannover

ISBN: 978-3-7727-1549-5

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Thank you, Mitch & Günter

We would like to dedicate this book to Mitch Legutke and Günter Gerngross.

Thanks, Mitch, for your ever present enthusiasm and support.

Thanks, Günter, you primary EFL pioneer, for your outstanding sense of humour and generosity.

List of abbreviations used in the book

- BICs = basic interpersonal communicative skills*
- CALP = cognitive academic language proficiency*
- CEFR = Common European framework of reference*
- CLIL = content and language integrated learning*
- CMC = computer-mediated communication
- EFL = English as a foreign language
- ELP = European language portfolio
- FL = foreign language
- FonF = focus on form
- ICC = intercultural communicative competence
- ICT = information communication technology
- L1 = first language(s)
- L2 = second language(s)
- PE = physical education
- YL(s) = young learner(s)
- ZPD = zone of proximal development

Reading guide

The * at the end of words indicates that they are explained in the glossary (p.227). We only mark the technical terms when they are used for the first time in a chapter.

We refer to chapters in which a topic is dealt with in depth as follows (→ Chapters 3 and 4) and in the same way to available download materials (→ Download materials 3.1).

Introduction

Why a new book on primary EFL?

It has been more than 12 years since Michael Legutke, Andreas Müller-Hartmann and Marita Schocker published their book on *Teaching English in the Primary School* in 2009. In the intervening years a great deal has happened within research into primary EFL, at the practical level in classrooms themselves, and at the national and international level, where, thanks to the *CEFR**, language teaching in primary schools has been placed under the spotlight in an unprecedented way. We felt it was time, therefore, for a comprehensive update on the new and evolving priorities, the resulting educational goals, on the exciting and expanding body of ‘bottom-up’ research in the field of primary EFL, and lastly and most importantly on the practical consequences for the classroom.

Who is the book for?

We have written this book for teachers of English in primary education, both pre-service teachers in their 1st university-based and 2nd internship phase of teacher training and also in-service teacher educators. The structure and approach of this volume is designed in such a way that it can be easily used as a course book for seminars at universities. Further, it offers students abundant opportunities for self-study and carefully selected recommendations for follow-up reading. We have also tried to provide a consistent and clear structure and an easily accessible writing style, which we hope will facilitate understanding and enjoyment. Finally, we hope that experienced teachers will find this book an encouragement to explore and reflect on their teaching. They are, after all, ideally placed through their current practice to gauge the ideas we present in this volume as we try to link theory and research through best-practice examples from primary classrooms. It is our firm belief that teachers develop as professionals by reflecting on their work and the work of others, and at the same time by being able to critically read and understand the relevance of research published in their own field.

What has changed in the field of primary EFL?

Diversity of language learners and their *lived experiences**

Our starting point is the diversity of language learners and their specific and heterogeneous needs which have a fundamental impact both on the choice

of content and on appropriate ways of learning English today. Primary teachers increasingly face the challenge of working with children whose lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, mixed-ability and educational needs vary more than ever before. Children often have extensive out-of-school experiences with the English language which have an influence on their motivation to learn and their awareness of English as a lingua franca. Their *multilingual** and multicultural experiences contribute to the richness of the learning environment and lend themselves well to develop their curiosity, sensitivity and empathy towards others and to prepare them for interaction with people from a multiplicity of backgrounds. Finally, children come to primary school with experience of a variety of media forms that can be productively incorporated and built on.

European education policy recommendations

Meanwhile, English has not only been introduced as a compulsory subject in almost all European countries, including Germany, but there is – despite the ongoing debate about when it is best to start – no dispute about it being a constituent part of every child’s literacy. The European Commission recommends “exposure to more than one language taking place in an early childhood education and care setting in a pre-primary school context” (European Commission 2011: 6), which has fundamentally affected curricula and educational goals from the time when children attend elementary education. Policies of inclusive education and life-long learning support the acquisition of key competences “that allow full participation in society” (Council of Europe 2018c, n. p.). These key competences involve the “provision of language learning, which is increasingly important for modern societies, intercultural understanding and cooperation” (*ibid.*). They include multilingual competences which are defined as:

A positive attitude [which] involves the appreciation of cultural diversity, an interest and curiosity about different languages and intercultural communication. It also involves respect for each person’s individual linguistic profile, including both respect for the mother tongue of persons belonging to minorities and / or with a migrant background and appreciation for a country’s official language(s) as a common framework for interaction. (*ibid.*)

The goals that the European Commission pursues with early education therefore go far beyond the linguistic skills of being able to speak, write, listen and read but they advocate a broad concept of education which includes attitudinal competences such as open-mindedness towards other languages, cultural otherness and related beliefs, world views and practices or enjoy-

ment of language learning – foundations which need to be built in pre-school and primary education.

Developments in primary foreign language education and research

The last decade has seen extensive empirical research on relevant areas of primary foreign language education as a result of the growing provision of primary English world-wide. Meanwhile, the teaching and learning of EFL has developed to be an established discipline in its own right, with a primary EFL specific methodology, professional *journals**, conferences and professorships at universities. Developments concern, for example, research in appropriate methodology, the acquisition of the written language and reading skills, the role of literature and cultural learning, digital media in the classroom and issues related to a smooth transition from primary to secondary education.

Technological advances in ICT

The availability of the internet, computers and mobile phones – despite the challenges for teachers as they add to the complexity of their language learning environments – offers children the opportunity to engage with others and to experience English as an authentic means of communication. Many children grow up with ICT technology and use it as a cultural practice from an early age. We will integrate its potential throughout the book.

What pedagogical approach is appropriate in meeting these new priorities?

The present volume considers the heterogeneity of children's backgrounds and takes a *learner-oriented perspective*. Consequently, we subscribe to the *task approach* to language teaching and learning which starts by considering the needs of the children when they are learning English. It has become an established approach to language teaching and learning world-wide for various reasons: there is comprehensive national and international empirical classroom research which has confirmed its appropriateness and it is the approach that is recommended by European and national education policies (→ Chapters 3 and 4). The concept of *task** if used in the context of education refers to language *learning activities** which “conceptualize learning from learners’ perspectives, that is, their needs, their ideas, their *discourses**, their competences and considers the resulting support that seems appropriate for each classroom and each individual learner in this classroom” (Müller-Hartmann & Schocker 2018c: 238). Tasks invite learners “to focus primarily on meaning exchange and to use language for real world, non-linguistic purposes” (Van den Branden 2006b: 1). A broad perspective on tasks in-

cludes a reflection of the quality of the language learning environment – the classroom – and considers ways to provide a positive, safe class climate for the children (Devlieger & Goossens 2007). The role of the teacher is no longer one of transmitting pre-selected knowledge to her class but has changed to one of a guide and facilitator who considers learners' needs by reflecting (ideally in cooperation with the children) the following elements of any lesson:

1. What is it that we should concentrate on, why is it relevant? (Level: content, topics)
2. Who is interested in what we have to say, who can we exchange ideas with and in which contexts? (Level: audiences, modes of communication [CMC, real], learning environments)
3. What form is appropriate for communicating this lesson's content to audiences? (Level: language skills, genres, discourses)

In what way does our book consider new priorities? What are the chapters and how are they organized?

It is one of the fundamental principles of our book that we develop theory and principles of teaching and learning from empirical observation and research of successful classroom practice. We therefore hope that our book will convince readers to see the immediate relevance of research and theory for their own contexts of practice. Our examples, taken from practice, serve more than simply to illustrate theory. They are the starting point of any reflection. Through this inductive '*bottom-up*' approach we strongly believe that theory may become relevant and meaningful to teachers.

The chapters in this book address the context factors which have an impact on the teaching of English in primary schools and provide a survey on available research (→ Chapters 1 and 2). They describe how to organize children's learning through challenging and motivating tasks and how to manage the resulting processes in the classroom effectively (→ Chapters 3 and 4). They illustrate how to integrate the competences and a FonF in a meaningful way; and they discuss the role of literature, cultural learning and the use of media and teaching materials (→ Chapters 5 – 11). Finally, they describe ways of acknowledging and assessing learners' achievement (→ Chapter 12). Each of the 12 chapters is organized as follows: an introduction, which raises readers' awareness of the relevance and focus of the chapter, is followed by a reflection that is practice-based (e. g. it asks readers to reflect upon a scenario taken from a primary classroom, a task or a learner text) and encourages readers to activate their existing ideas and assumptions about the topic in question. Following practice-based discussions of the content of the main chapter, we

conclude with a summary of the key findings, address remaining issues and suggest ideas for further independent reading. A glossary of relevant technical terms supports the accessibility of the text. Additional download materials are provided which comprise annotated websites, extra materials or further useful references and practice ideas. Finally, we have decided to use the female form for primary teachers throughout, simply because most of the primary EFL teachers are women.

Acknowledgements

For this major update of the original book, which became a completely new version in its own right, the authors were delighted to welcome Annika Kolb to the writing team. Michael Legutke agreed to be our senior advisor and accompanied the project throughout with his careful reviews of our work. We were also glad to have Howard Thomas join the team whose thoughtful reading and editing of our chapters went far beyond what we could have expected from this expert in the field of language teaching. And finally, Flavia Reiff has proofread our text meticulously for any formal inconsistencies and for readability. To you, Mitch, Howard and Flavia, our thanks for your contributions to this new volume. It has been a pleasure to collaborate with you.

Freiburg, April 2021, Annika Kolb & Marita Schocker

1 English in the primary school

1.1 Introduction

The introduction of FL learning in primary schools has been characterised as “possibly the world’s biggest development in education” (Johnstone 2009: 33). Whereas children used to start learning a FL in secondary school, FL teaching has now become an integral part of primary school curricula around the world. In Europe, this development is linked in part to the opening of borders and the enormous rise in economic and cultural exchanges as by-products of globalization. Children grow up in an increasingly *multilingual** world. Many of them speak different languages at school and at home; they meet people from diverse cultural backgrounds and use a variety of languages to communicate through digital media. The English language plays a special role in this multilingual environment. In most countries, primary school children encounter English in their surroundings on a daily basis. Its role as a lingua franca makes English an indispensable tool for exploring children’s environments. The diverse, out-of-school experiences of the children combined with the key role of English in coping with the demands of today’s world make an overwhelming case for the relevance of teaching English in primary schools.

Reflection



What do you believe are the relevant aspects to consider when teaching English at primary school level? Please make a list and take into account:

- the context: purposes of primary English; advantages and disadvantages of teaching primary school children compared to older learners; challenges of this context;
- the learners: children’s *lived experiences** and resulting language learning needs; the cognitive, social and emotional characteristics of this age group;
- the primary EFL classroom: primary school pedagogy.

While reading the chapter, compare your notes to the issues we will discuss.

In this chapter, we will first shed some light on the wider political and educational context of FL learning, and in doing so we will take a brief retrospective view of its development and present relevant European and national

initiatives (→ 1.2). We will then focus on our target group, learners in primary school. We will explore their lived experiences and the ways in which children learn languages (→ 1.3). Further, we will discuss how FL teaching is related to aspects of general primary school pedagogy (→ 1.4). In our conclusion, we will use the main findings of this chapter to summarize arguments in favour of primary FL learning and introduce *task-based language learning** as the central concept of this book (→ 1.5).

1.2 The context

English is a relatively new subject in German primary schools. Traditionally, children did not begin learning a FL until secondary school. This changed at the beginning of the new millennium as a result of several developments in the latter half of the 20th century:

Following early attempts to teach languages to children in the context of the progressive educational movement (*Reformpädagogik*), in particular Rudolf Steiner's *Waldorf* educational initiative (Börner 2017: 21), primary FL teaching became the focus of increased attention in Germany from the 1970s onwards. A few pilot projects showed promising results, but also highlighted the need for better-qualified teachers. Furthermore, continuity between primary and secondary school and also learner-oriented teaching methodology were recognised as major challenges (Börner 2017). The results of these pilot projects led to the publication of primary school specific *journals**, that is, publications which explore research and good practice on the topic and the foundation of *professional associations** which aimed to promote primary FL learning (see Börner 2017 for a comprehensive overview of the development of primary FL teaching in Germany and Download materials 1 and 2). The projects were strongly based on the assumption that “younger is better”, implying that an early start is more likely to develop competences effectively in a FL as children are endowed with certain language learning abilities that will allow them to become more proficient users of the language (→ 1.3 for research on this issue).

From the year 2000 onwards, increased European cooperation prompted numerous initiatives in early FL learning. In 2002, several European countries agreed to teach two additional languages from a very early age (Presidency conclusions 2002). A review of the available research on primary FL learning in 2006 (Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek-German 2006) “moved away from a central focus on age as the determining factor, providing a broader understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of an early start” (Enever 2015: 15). Languages were seen as a prerequisite for participa-

tion in social and cultural life: “The ability to understand and communicate in other languages is a basic skill for all European citizens” (European Commission 2005: 10). Furthermore, the potential of FL learning for the development of intercultural understanding and *language awareness** was highlighted. Starting early was associated with the hope that children would develop an interest in language learning, opening up a gateway to other languages. Against the background of children’s increasingly *plurilingual** lived experience, foreign languages were now considered part of a child’s basic literacy education.

These developments led to a lowering of the starting age in most member states of the European Union (→ Figure 1.1). The same happened throughout Germany, following the examples of federal states such as Hamburg, which had introduced English as a subject into the primary curriculum in the 1990s. Since the academic year 2006/2007, a FL has been taught in primary schools in all federal states; in most cases, the language is English.

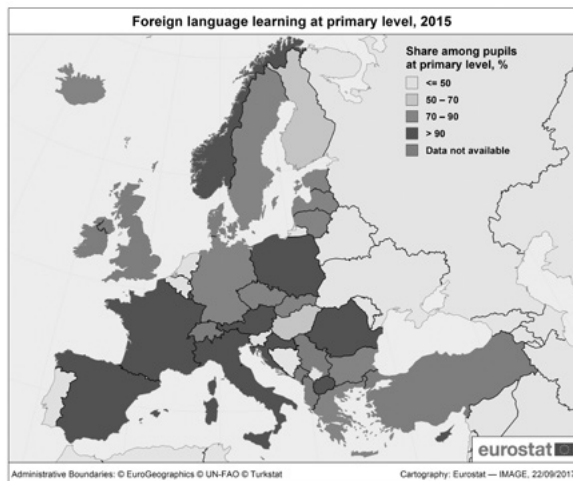


Figure 1.1: Primary FL learning in Europe (Eurostat 2017)

On a European level as well as in Asia and South America, primary FL learning is still gaining ground (Rixon 2015). In 2015, more than 80 % of all learners in primary education in Europe were learning a FL as a compulsory subject (European Commission 2017: 61) and numbers are still growing. There is also a major trend to begin teaching a FL in pre-schools (Birsak de Jersey 2021; Mourão & Lorenço 2015). Currently, many countries are lowering the starting age again; Poland and Cyprus, for example, have introduced English as a compulsory subject in pre-school education.

In Germany, there are considerable differences in how the federal states have implemented FL teaching in primary school. These pertain to the starting age, the number of weekly lessons, assessment regulations and teacher education (Hempel, Kötter & Rymarczyk 2017). Whereas the majority of the states start in Year 3, some offer English or another language already in Year 1, when children are around six years old. The amount of time dedicated to language learning varies from one to three 45-minute lessons per week. The competences that the children should develop are defined with reference to the *CEFR** (Council of Europe 2001), in most competence areas the goal is the level A1. The curriculum for Baden-Württemberg, for example, states that children should be able to talk about topics related to their lived experience by making simple statements and asking and answering questions (Ministerium für Kultus, Jugend und Sport 2016: 4). It distinguishes between communicative, intercultural and learning-to-learn competences (→ Chapter 5). All federal states agree that FL teaching with this age group should be learner-centred, action-oriented, based on current primary school pedagogy and should aim at the development of ICC (Kultusministerkonferenz 2013; see Lohmann 2017 for a detailed discussion of the similarities and differences between the federal states). The differences between the federal states are partly due to the lack of common *educational standards** by the end of primary school. That means, in contrast to secondary level, the federal states so far have not agreed on a binding set of competences that children should acquire in primary school. Such standards could be used for diagnostic purposes, provide equal opportunities for children across Germany, promote the development of teaching methodology, lay the foundation for the development of teaching material and foster continuity between primary and secondary school (Börner et al. 2017). Common *standards** would also increase the status of English as a regular subject in primary school and underline the need for qualified teachers. To make up for this lack of standardisation, the BIG-Kreis (the acronym stands for *Beratungs-, Informations-, Gesprächskreis*: a group of researchers, teachers and stakeholders in education whose aim it is to develop research-based guidelines for teaching English at primary school) has developed a proposal for primary school English standards in 2005 that was revised in 2017 (ibid.: 92 ff.).

Prompted by various controversial studies on the long-term effects of FL teaching at primary school level, there has been a debate on the optimal starting age (→ Chapter 2). As a result, two federal states, which had previously started in Year 1 have moved the beginning of FL teaching to Year 3. These recent developments in Germany are in sharp contrast to the current trend across the world, which is to start teaching a FL to children at an ever-younger age.

1.3 The learners

In the international literature on teaching English to children, the target group is very often characterised as young learners. The age span of these children can range from pre-school children to young adults, thus covering 3 to 18 years. In a narrower sense, the term YLs is used to refer to children up to the age of twelve, which internationally is a common age to finish primary school (Bland 2015a: 1; see also Ellis 2014). In the German context, children usually start primary school at the age of six and finish it after four years at the age of ten (with the exception of a few federal states, which have six years of primary school). Throughout the book, we will refer to children of this age span, which is six to ten years old. The preconditions these children bring to the primary EFL classroom are influenced by their lived experiences as well as their cognitive, emotional and social stages of development.

1.3.1 Children's lived experiences

The available data on how children currently live and surveys of how they view these background conditions offer interesting and relevant insights for teachers. An example of such a research project is the international study *Children's World* (Rees et al. 2020) and its German counterpart *Children's Worlds+* (Andresen et al. 2019), which aim through questionnaires and group interviews to shed light on the needs and well-being of 8-14-year-old children (→ Download materials 4.1).

These studies show that primary school children come from very different ethnic, cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds. In 2019, 37 % of the learners at German schools had a migrant background, but this proportion varies considerably between the different federal states and is higher in cities compared to rural areas (Mediendienst Integration n.d.). In primary schools in the city of Hamburg, for example, a migrant background applied to 50 % of the children in 2019 (Behörde für Schule und Berufsbildung 2019). As a result, children bring a variety of languages to the classroom. About 40 % of primary school children speak a language other than German at home (Andresen et al. 2019: 35). Turkish, Russian, Polish and Arabic are the most represented (Lohmann 2017: 14).

Children also live in a variety of different family contexts. Although the traditional two-parent family is still widespread, the diversity of family forms has increased and now includes so-called blended families and families with same-sex parents (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend 2020: 51). About 19 % of primary school children live in a one-parent household (ibid.) and 75 % of all children in Germany live together with at least

one brother or sister (ibid.: 50). When asked about their opportunities for participation in the families' decisions, around 80 % of 8-year-old children feel that they are taken seriously (Andresen et al. 2019: 43). However, children report very differing experiences in this respect: "Experiences of autonomy [...] vary greatly within a group of peers and depend not least on the parenting style exercised by the parents" (Andresen et al. 2019: 50, translation by authors).

There are also large differences concerning the economic situation of families. 15 to 20 % of children in Germany grow up with a poverty risk, particularly those who live in a single-parent family or have more than three siblings (ibid.: 104 ff.). About half of the children in the *Children's Worlds+* study stated they were concerned from time to time about their family's financial situation (Andresen et al. 2019: 135). Only 75 % reported that they regularly have a quiet place at home to do school work (ibid.: 133).

Media and digitalisation also play an influential role in children's daily lives. Media use now accounts for a large part of the way children spend their free time (→ Chapter 9 for detailed data on children's media use). On the one hand, these virtual experiences may well replace face-to-face encounters and deprive them from hands-on experiences. On the other hand, the various media forms provide children with opportunities for communication across the globe and for exploring a variety of topics. They also enable children to encounter English on a daily basis, for example in computer games and videos, which makes out-of-class learning experiences more and more relevant (Roos 2020).

1.3.2 Children as language learners

Major differences are noted in children between the ages of six to ten years old with reference to their cognitive, social and emotional development. Children at the beginning of their school career usually do not read and write, they encounter language holistically without analysing it, their world knowledge is limited and often their imagined and real worlds coincide. At the end of primary school, however, children are well established in school, their ability to read and write is well developed, they are starting to analyse language forms and beginning to be aware of themselves as language learners (Pinter 2017: 3). In the course of the four years of primary school, children's cognitive competences develop, they are gradually able to learn intentionally, understand abstract and symbolic representations, categorise their experiences, use learning strategies and solve complex problems (Koerber 2014). Emotionally, they become increasingly more autonomous, more and more independent from their parents and carers and orientate themselves towards their peer group (Petillon 2014: 184).

‘The younger the better’ is a statement very often put forward in discussions about primary language learning. When first attempts to teach primary English in small-scale projects were carried out, this idea was usually the main rationale for an early start. It was based on the success of *immersion** programmes in Canada and the seemingly effortless *language acquisition** of children in bilingual families.

From evidence of impressive language acquisition results in both the home environment and immersion schooling contexts, parents, policymakers and many researchers have generalized such successes to an assumption that similar results can be achieved in the ordinary school classroom. (Enever 2015: 16)

This assumption was also based on a ‘critical period’ for language learning at a young age, which some researchers claimed. According to this theory, learners who started learning a language after this period would not be able to achieve the same competences as those who had started in their early childhood (Piske 2017: 45 f.). However, further research revealed that older learners’ more advanced cognitive skills and learning strategies put them at an advantage compared to young children (Enever 2015: 21 f.). Consequently, the starting age is only one factor among many that have to be considered (Singleton & Pfenninger 2019; → Chapter 2 for research on this topic). The success of early language learning programmes depends above all on a favourable learning context that includes appropriately educated teachers, continuity between primary and secondary language learning and suitable teaching methodology (Elsner 2017; Enever 2015; Kolb & Legutke 2019; Rixon 2015). Regarding teaching methodology, Piske (2017: 51 f.) identifies the following key aspects of successful language teaching at primary school level, based on several studies from the perspective of language acquisition:

- continuous intensive exposure to the new language and *authentic** and *rich language input**;
- ample opportunities for learners to actively produce language;
- training for specific skills (e.g. pronunciation and grammar), taking the learners’ L1 into account;
- a motivating learning environment.

In such a favourable learning context, children can benefit from particular advantages they tend to have compared to much older learners: “Children are sensitive to the sounds and the rhythm of new languages, and they enjoy copying new sounds and patterns of intonation” (Pinter 2017: 37). Furthermore, children are very often less inhibited and anxious than older learners,

access the new language holistically and intuitively and play spontaneously with language.

1.4 The primary EFL classroom

Primary school is the first form of schooling that is obligatory and acts as a link between the less formal pre-school sector and the two- or three-tier system at the level of secondary education. Whereas in the past children with special needs mostly went to specialist schools, following the ratification of the *UN Convention on the right of persons with disabilities* in 2009, inclusive education was fostered. However, in 2019, the number of German children with special needs learning in an inclusive education setting was still as low as 40 % (Hollenbach-Biele & Klemm 2020: 9).

As the first stage of formal schooling, primary school develops basic competences (Heinzel 2002: 541). Current primary school pedagogy aims to follow learner-oriented approaches that focus on active and explorative learning and emphasize the role of meaningful *tasks** as well as cooperation (Heinzel 2014: 157; Stern & Hardy 2014). Individualised and open teaching forms such as learning in projects, mixed-age classes and *free work** try to take account of children's varying needs and to foster learner autonomy and participation (Einsiedler et al. 2014).

Whereas the German primary school traditionally has been a half-day institution, the number of schools that have changed to all-day schooling has increased considerably since 2002. In 2018, about two thirds of primary schools offered all-day education (KMK 2020: 9).

In the *Children's Worlds+* study, there is evidence of a positive, learner-oriented relationship between the children and their teachers (→ Figure 1.2). Around 70 % of children say that their teacher listens to them and takes them seriously (Andresen et al. 2019: 61). Further, 80 % of primary school children state that their teachers help them when they have problems (ibid.: 125). While the majority of primary school children in Germany seem to be happy with their school, these results show nevertheless that there are still some children who require additional support and whose needs have to be considered more.

While at the secondary level specialist teachers teach their respective subjects, in primary schools there is usually just one teacher who is responsible for the majority of the subjects in one class. This very often results in a class teacher rather than a specialist language teacher being in charge of the English classes. In 2007, only 22 % of English teachers in the federal state Baden-Württemberg had completed a degree in English and 19 % had not received

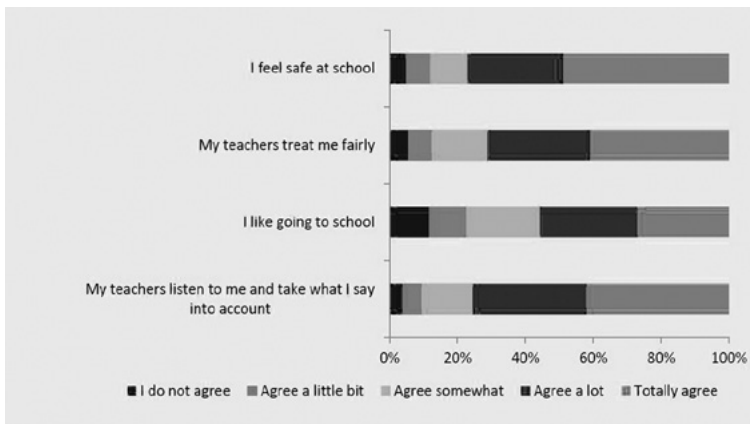


Figure 1.2: Children's attitudes towards school according to the *Children's Worlds National Report Germany* (around 3000 participants, ages 7–14) (Wilmes et al. 2019: 16)

any training in EFL at all (Kolb 2011: 148f.). But it is very much the quality of teachers' EFL education that influences their teaching style. Research suggests that specialist teachers put more emphasis on speaking and writing tasks as well as systematic vocabulary work (Kolb 2011: 152f.). They also report using more English in the classroom than teachers without a formal qualification (Wilden & Porsch 2020b: 645). It is a positive sign therefore that the number of specialist teachers seems to be on the increase, now that degree courses in FL teaching at primary level have been established at universities.

Another difference to secondary school can be noted in the status of English as a subject in the curriculum. With only one to three lessons per week in the majority of primary schools, it is not considered to be one of the core subjects and learners' competences are not taken into account when deciding which type of secondary school children should go to after Year 4 (Porsch & Wilden 2020: 168). Finally, only a small percentage of state primary schools offer significantly more English language teaching in the form of bilingual tracks or immersion concepts (→ Chapter 10).

1.5 Conclusion

Following the discussion of the context, the learners and the primary EFL classroom in this chapter, we will now summarise our rationale for teaching English at primary school (→ 1.5.1) and explain why we subscribe to task-based language learning as the central concept of this book (→ 1.5.2).

1.5.1 Why teaching English in primary school is important

Although we have shown that the equation ‘the younger – the better’ does not generally hold true and that long-term linguistic gains are not always obvious (→ Chapter 2), there are several reasons for teaching English at primary school that go beyond acquiring competences in another language:

- Children do seem to have advantages in certain aspects of language learning. Their general enjoyment of imitation and uninhibited access to language seems to promote the holistic learning of *chunks** as well as the development of pronunciation and intonation.
- Starting to learn languages at an age at which children are usually rather open-minded and enthusiastic to explore the world around them may promote a positive attitude towards language learning in general and can open up a gateway to other languages.
- Integrating different languages into the curriculum reflects the cultural and plurilingual diversity of our society. This involves the appreciation of children’s home languages as well as the learning of foreign languages. Children can bring the prior knowledge and competences that they have developed in a plurilingual environment. For example, they are often aware of and can use communicative and language learning strategies. Experiencing different languages helps children develop *language awareness** (Lohe 2018).
- Primary FL learning can contribute to political and global citizenship education. It helps to develop curiosity for cultural aspects of life and to value diversity (→ Chapter 9). This involves understanding how people use language to express culturally shared ideas and identities (for example through politeness conventions and the use of indirect *speech acts**).
- Since English is an integral part of children’s lived experience even at primary age, it is a major advantage for them to be competent in English and to be able to participate in social and cultural *discourse**. English as the *lingua franca* enables children to communicate with people from all over the world and to explore personally relevant topics.

1.5.2 Why learning English through tasks is an appropriate approach to teaching English at primary level

The context of English teaching at primary school, the characteristics of primary school children and the resulting primary-specific pedagogy help us to establish task-based language learning as the central methodological approach this book is based on. Findings from developmental psychology, language acquisition and primary school pedagogy support the principle of

working with meaningful communicative tasks on personally relevant topics as appropriate for our context (for a detailed discussion of task-based language learning → Chapter 3).

Current developmental psychology does not suggest fixed stages of child development but highlights that learners' heterogeneity is the constituent feature of primary classrooms. For example, children may be more or less outgoing and their individual preferred ways of learning may vary because of their different personalities, cultural backgrounds, interests or their individual development. Hence primary school learners do not present themselves as a homogeneous group and teachers are faced with often considerable differences in children's cognitive, emotional, psychological and social preconditions. Task-based language learning takes account of this heterogeneity. The prominent criterion for the choice of content is the question of its relevance for the children in a classroom. Instead of suggesting generally recommended ideas of what might qualify as child-appropriate topics and materials, a task-oriented framework enables teachers to consider and include the actual views and ideas of their learners. This involves their respective home languages and children's out-of-school experiences, for example their media use. Moreover, the task framework allows children to participate in choosing tasks, thereby helping them to assume responsibility for their own learning, developing learner autonomy and social competences.

Both language acquisition research and primary school pedagogy highlight the importance of active and social learning in authentic communicative situations. Children learn by actively trying to make sense of the world around them and of their experiences. Working with tasks supports learners in their curiosity and their urge to explore their environment. Communication in authentic situations facilitates cooperative learning and makes children actively produce language rather than just listening and reacting to language input. The products of a task (e. g. a talk, a poster, a discussion or a presentation in English) can give them a sense of accomplishment, which fosters their developing identity as language learners. By taking the children's needs and ideas seriously, the task approach supports teachers to establish reliable relationships with their learners and create a safe learning atmosphere which is particularly important for children who have experienced family problems, flight or separation. You will discover a range of ways how to put this into practice in the following chapters.

In conclusion, the focus of the debate on teaching English in primary schools has moved forward from discussing 'the age factor' or disputing the reasons whether it should be a fixed part of primary education to discussing the appropriate pedagogy and supporting insights through empirical research (→ Chapter 2). Given the relatively low number of lessons per week in