Current Developments in Teaching English as a Foreign Language in German Primary Schools

Primary English – a Presence to be Reckoned With

As German language and educational policy differs tremendously from one federal state to another, the teaching of foreign languages in primary schools is characterized by a striking diversity of programmes and syllabi. Yet, the teaching of English as a foreign language at primary level (TEFL-PL) has been hailed as a success all across Germany. The early pilot studies concurred that TEFL-PL opens up opportunity for language growth and cultural learning (Blondin et al. 1998; Doyé and Lütte 1977; Kahl and Knebler 1996; for a historical overview cf. Kubanek-German 2001). Surprisingly, early foreign language learning remained a merely optional feature of the educational system until the end of the 20th century. Then, the progress of European integration and the need for the advancement of language learning and plurilingualism inspired the expansion and led to the compulsory teaching of foreign languages in German primary schools with English taking the lead in most federal states.

The expansion of TEFL-PL led to the emergence of a new area of research, which has received wider attention over the last decade. In Germany three conferences indicate the growing importance of TEFL-PL and proved to be significant milestones: In 2004 the triennial FFF congress (Fortschritte im Frühen Fremdsprachenlernen) was initiated, the first academic conference to explore exclusively primary school-related concerns of foreign language teaching and learning, which marked an explicit interest in attainment levels (Schlüter 2006). When in 2008 the international AILA (International Association of Applied Linguistics) conference was held, academics from different countries teamed up in a primary-specific symposium about early literacy (Diehr and Rymarczyk 2010); this symposium marked a momentous shift from an exclusive focus on aural skills in TEFL-PL to the integration of speaking, reading and writing skills, from playful approaches to more analytical ones, including e.g. language awareness. Then, in 2009, the DGFF’s (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Fremdsprachenforschung) biennial convention hosted its first primary-specific section reflecting the rapidly growing new field of research (Kötter and Rymarczyk 2011).

A number of large scale studies can be seen as further indication of the discipline’s growing impact: Investigating French and English classes at primary schools in Baden-Württemberg the pilot study WiBe (Wissenschaftliche Begleitung) confirmed the achievability of the first tentative attainment levels (Niveaumessungen, Werlen et al. 2005, 57ff.). In the federal state of North Rhine-Westphalia the EVENING Study (Evaluation Englisch in der Grundschule) came to similar conclusions, declaring that TEFL-PL can bring real gains in language learning (Engel 2009, 197). These results are compatible with findings compiled in a European survey (Edelenbos et al. 2006) of some one hundred empirical studies.

Rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive survey of studies, we aim to present selected research results marking the recent development of TEFL-PL and to draw...
readers’ attention to the ensuing open questions. In order to underscore the shift from playful approaches to teaching to more analytical yet age-appropriate ones, the first section deals with results from studies into speaking and is followed by a review of studies into grammar in section two and into literacy in section three.

1. The Central Role of Speaking Skills

The development of oral skills takes priority in all primary school EFL programmes and syllabi. As the learning process is intended to emulate the acquisition of children’s first language (L1), teaching naturally emphasizes speaking skills. Despite this pre-eminence of oracy in the EFL class there are conspicuously few studies investigating learners’ oral skills. One explanation for this mismatch can be found in the lack of empirical evidence. Researchers simply do not know how much output in English one can reasonably expect from children aged six to ten. Although teenage students can be expected to reach the crucial 2,000-word threshold (Milton 2009, 27, 52) at the end of their third year of EFL instruction, researchers tend to expect much slower progress among primary school learners.

Beginners require a different approach to vocabulary teaching and learning. The incidental vocabulary acquisition through reading, a field in which much vocabulary research has been conducted, is clearly not a feasible way for broadening and deepening their vocabulary knowledge (Kersten 2010, 81).

The EVENING Study, conducted in North Rhine-Westphalia between 2005 and 2007, discovered that at the end of a two-year EFL scheme fourth graders who had received about two hours’ English per week had developed good basic skills in listening and reading (Groot-Wilken et al. 2007; Engel et al. 2009). Their speaking skills, however, lagged behind (Engel 2009, 197). The research team observed that the learners were motivated to express themselves in English, but as they were lacking in verbs, adjectives, modal verbs and function words, their utterances were mainly restricted to one- and two-word phrases (Keßler 2009, 174; Kötter 2009, 155). Engel concluded that young learners need more support to produce coherent and longer oral texts (2009, 199).

It is worth noting that results like the ones obtained in the EVENING Study may not solely result from instructional shortcomings, but also depend on data collection methods. In her investigation into third and fourth graders’ lexical progress, Kersten (2010) noticed that tasks and tests available for primary EFL learners underestimate children’s potential. As the vocabulary tests used in her own project were too easy, they produced a marked distribution of scores and led the researcher to conclude that more challenging production tasks were needed (Kersten 2010, 137).

When piloting instruments for her TAPS Study (Testing and Assessing Spoken English in Primary School), Diehr, for similar reasons, developed oral tasks that gradually demanded a more challenging text production from learners (Diehr 2006, 12; Diehr and Frisch 2008). Those tasks were used in primary schools in Baden-Württemberg, enabling the research team to analyse 216 spoken learner texts for quantity (length), syntactic quality (types of clauses) and coherence markers (conjunctions). In particular, the narrative texts spoken by third- and fourth-graders ranged between 27 and 353 words per task and contained complex syntactical structures and inflections (Diehr et al. 2007, 100-101). The TAPS Study revealed that after three
years of EFL learning, and in some cases even after two, children can produce much more than just one- and two-word utterances if they are trained with the help of challenging tasks.

Roos believes that, at least in principle, primary school learners are capable of using the foreign language actively and creatively (Roos 2007, 185). Notwithstanding this optimistic assumption, her own analysis of 24 third-graders’ oral performance revealed that after only one year of learning EFL the children had not yet acquired the grammatical structures necessary to fulfil the curricular requirements (186). To address this problem, Roos proposes that teachers should adopt a task-based approach to language teaching encouraging young learners to interact in the foreign language (185).

2. The Place of Grammar

The debate about focus on form and language awareness has shown that a distinction needs to be drawn between grammar as a topic of lessons and grammar as a feature of language in use. It is true that primary school children ought not to be treated as small grammarians describing complex rules with the help of linguistic terminology. But the exclusion of explicit grammar as the focus of language activities does not mean that children cannot be encouraged to discover regularities and patterns of language in use. While infants gradually extract specific constructions of their first language from the rich language input from their social environment (cf. e.g. the usage-based account by Bannard, Lieven, and Tomasello 2009, 17284), foreign language learners in schools have far fewer chances of discovering language patterns due to a lack of exposure (Siepmann 2007). "The acquisition of linguistic knowledge and its fluent use, like other skills, is affected by frequency of exposure and practice" (Ellis et al. 2008, 389).

Mindt and Schlüter propose a four-step model of language learning that takes primary school learners from imitation and intuitive transfer to conscious transfer and finally to the ability to discover and formulate an explicit grammatical rule (e.g. "Does a plural form always end in -s?") (Mindt and Schlüter 2007, 32ff.). Kuhn's theoretical study of grammar in the primary EFL class is complemented by a practical section that suggests age-appropriate awareness-raising activities for use in school to help learners progress from one step to the next (Kuhn 2006, 159ff.).

Pienemann concludes from several of his studies that learners' use of morphological and syntactic structures in spoken English develops in six fixed phases (2006, 33ff.). In his Processability Hypothesis he suggests that EFL learners can only tackle one phase at a time, thus laying the foundation for the next one (Pienemann 2006, 56). However, his theory does not address a serious problem: it does not mention which indicators there are for the children's progress from one phase to the next. After all, researchers ought not to conclude from one instance (or two) of a grammatical phenomenon in a learner text that the child has reached a certain phase in its development of morphological structures (Ehlich 2009, 80-81).

In following Pienemann's Processability Hypothesis, Kößler compared grammatical features in spoken learner texts with expectations raised in syllabi (2006, 159ff.). According to his interpretation, primary school syllabi for EFL need to be adjusted to realistic targets, i.e. structures that can be taught because learners are able
to process them (Keßler 2006, 180). For Keßler the assumed acquisition of morphological and syntactical structures along developmentally fixed lines does not exclude learners' linguistic risk taking in conversation. He recommends that teachers encourage children to use the foreign language creatively and productively rather than merely employ formulaic expressions (Keßler 2006, 189).

Roos takes a similar view, interpreting instances of grammatically accurate utterances as resulting from rote learning rather than from 'proper' acquisition of the structural features of English. She warns teachers and researchers not to take such utterances as indicators of successful acquisition of grammatical structures, e.g. plural -s morphemes, but to treat them as formulaic expressions which may not be correctly used in new circumstances and contexts (Roos 2008, 198). Like Keßler, Roos suggests that primary school EFL learners need to be encouraged to use the foreign language productively in interaction. The advice to teachers seems to be not to let learners repeat but to encourage them just to start talking.

The small scale comparative study, TAPS V (V = Vergleich) conducted by Diehr and Polte in Newcastle (UK) and Heidelberg (Germany) suggests that primary EFL learners can realistically produce extended talk far beyond one- and two-word utterances and exceeding imitative language use (Diehr and Polte 2009). The oral summaries of a children's story produced by fifteen L1 speakers of English were compared with summaries produced by twenty German L2 learners of English of the same age. The analysis was again based on the criteria of length, syntax and cohesive items. As was to be expected, the L2 speakers produced fewer words, yet, they used an impressive number of cohesive items in telling the story (42 on average per L2 learner), and they made use of the same range of syntactical and cohesive features as L1 speakers. TAPS V suggests that the L2 learners' language production was more lexically driven than rule-based, which Diehr and Polte interpreted as a sign of the children's budding generative principle (2009, 170; see also Diehr 2011, 18, 28-29).

While Keßler and Roos's publications endorse the casual teaching of creative language use, Demircioğlu's longitudinal study (2008) highlights the gains and benefits of teaching primary school learners according to a systematic approach. She collected her data after learners had moved on to secondary school and conducted five specifically designed tests and a self-assessment questionnaire throughout years 5 and 6. Demircioğlu shows that children who had experienced systematic English instruction (treatment group) from grade 3 onwards achieved higher scores in all tests than children who participated in less structured English lessons. They also expressed more confidence in their own foreign language skills and more pleasure in learning English than children with unstructured instruction and children without any EFL lessons. Interestingly, the learners of the treatment group were able to deal well with grammatical features such as simple present, present progressive and third person singular.

In all probability the debate about imitative, productive and creative elements, especially in learners' spoken English, will continue to prompt new research relating to the acquisition of grammar that may, in the end, inform teaching practices.

3. Reading and Writing as Integral Parts of TEFL-PL

Written skills in TEFL-PL have only just been opened up as an area of research. Until recently there was no need to look into early literacy acquisition since EFL did not begin before year 5.
Years 1-4 allowed the children to learn enough about reading and writing in German in order to be able to transfer this knowledge to English. This methodological laissez-faire worked quite well: the children transferred basic insights into the alphabetic system, the general differences between the German and the English phoneme-grapheme correspondences (PGCs) were grasped quickly and the various rules and subtleties of English orthography were acquired in connection with the input.

When the onset of EFL classes was brought forward to year 3, early studies investigating the introduction of the written form of English stressed its positive results. Reichart-Wallrabenstein, for example, reported on the positive results of instruction in the written language on young learners’ language awareness and their development of reflective skills (2004, 409ff.) whereas Duscha pointed at its support of mnemonic abilities linked to free speech (2007, 300).

The rather limited contact time of two hours per week taught for only two years, however, has soon been perceived as a problematic feature of TEFL-PL. Elsner (2010, 143) warns that especially the written skills can only remain basic with such a small number of classes.

A new and decisive impulse for research into early literacy came from Baden-Württemberg and Rhineland-Palatinate in 2006, when these two federal states took a first step in the direction of extending children’s contact time with English. They became the first to start EFL classes in year 1. Though starting in year 1, the introduction of the written form before year 3 was ruled out by the curricula. Research into the learners’ ideas about the written form of English at the end of these two years of oral EFL, however, proved that the children had developed their own ideas about writing in English. Wordlists they produced in a piloting showed invented spelling mainly based on German PGCs. The most striking feature in their invented spelling, its consistency (i.e. orthographic rules the children had generated and used), could only be regarded as detrimental in the long run as, due to the curricula, the learners have no correct orthographic model to which they could adjust their idiosyncratic versions (Rymarczyk 2008). These findings are substantiated by similar cases of invented spelling with English and Spanish or French and German to be acquired simultaneously (Lázaro Ibarrola 2010; Weth 2010). Hence, the fear of fossilization and loss of motivation in year 3, when the invented spellings have to be replaced by the correct orthographies, has prompted further research.

The following research focused on the reservations brought up against early English literacy classes, i.e. researchers checked whether learners at risk and multilingual children were disadvantaged and whether the literacy acquisition in German suffered from the contact with English orthography. The various tests in classrooms where written input had been presented implicitly but neither explicit reading nor explicit writing programmes had been employed, unanimously showed positive results.

It could be shown that intense contact with the written English form rather supports than overtaxes young learners. Second-graders with and without migrant backgrounds in immersion classrooms (i.e. without any TEFL-PL but working with written English texts in all their subjects) outperformed students who had received traditional oral English classes for two hours a week over the period of two years. Especially the literacy skills of the multilingual students were shown to be much better developed. This was found in both immersion and traditional classes (Rymarczyk 2010).
A study after eight months of schooling including EFL and the use of the written form of English suggested that even poor learners still acquired German literacy well. They were able to employ the advanced, alphabetic strategy to read German words and pseudo-words comparable to students without any early EFL classes (Rymarczyk and Musall 2010).

These learners identified as at risk also used the alphabetic strategy for reading English words and pseudo-words but based their pronunciation on the German PGC (Rymarczyk and Musall 2010, 80). Their reading comprehension, however, was much better than the faulty (i.e. German PGC based) reading aloud. The two different kinds of reading must be kept separate when evaluating the students’ achievements (Rymarczyk 2011).

The results of a study that compared third-graders who had been in touch with the English written form for three years and those who had only dealt with written English for one year fall in line with Elsner's findings (2010). Elsner states that 90 minutes of EFL classes in grades 3 and 4 neither enable students to read longer, unknown texts independently, nor do they allow them to write free texts (Elsner 2010, 43). In Rymarczyk's study (in print) the group with the longer contact time outperformed those in reading and writing English who (in accordance with the curriculum) had only received little input.

Also, the children who had been taught English and its written form in grades 1-3 achieved better results in German reading and writing than those who had started English in grade 3. Again, this held true for poor learners and the control group of average learners (Rymarczyk, in print).

Building on these first insights into early simultaneous spelling in German and English, the important question of how to teach early literacy in TEFL-PL has been engaged. Frisch (2010) showed that although currently written English is most commonly introduced by the whole word method in German primary schools, the phonics approach seems to assist the children's literacy acquisition to a greater extent. This method of teaching beginners to read and pronounce words by learning the sound value of letters, letter groups, and especially syllables seems to particularly support reading aloud. Whereas second-graders, after ten months of TEFL-PL taught according to the whole word method, read English pseudo-words with German PGCs, the group taught by means of the phonics-oriented approach had a much higher reading accuracy and also a slightly better reading comprehension (Frisch 2011). Frisch concludes that by teaching English PGCs explicitly (i.e. the phonics-oriented way) young learners are not asked for too much but seem to become interested in the new PGC (Frisch 2011, 83-84). She further argues that the learners probably benefit from a continuation of the method used in German literacy teaching, i.e. of Lautieren (sound-ing out graphemes) which is related to the phonics approach, rather than from the unrelated whole word approach (Frisch 2010). After all, even in programmes with simultaneous literacy acquisition, the German lessons always outnumber the English lessons and render the approach used in the L1 context as well as the German PGC dominant.

In sum, it can be stated that since the early teaching of literacy skills can avoid fossilization of invented spelling and support the children's literacy acquisition just as their ability to read out loud, curricula should embrace the written form of English right from the beginning. Also, the surprising result that German literacy acquisition
benefited from the contact with the written form of English (cf. above) indicates the need for more research.

Conclusion

As the studies cited show, there has been a momentous shift in TEFL-PL. The more explicit approaches that evolved from empirical research help children achieve well advanced levels in oral as well as in written skills. Migrant children are not left behind but are enabled to benefit from their multilinguality in TEFL-PL. Should the positive transfer of subskills from English to German be confirmed, TEFL-PL might actually support learners at risk as much as an extra hour of German.

In the light of the positive findings provided by the various studies discussed in this paper, the suggestion by the Expertenrat "Herkunft und Bildungserfolg" (2011, 15) is likely do more harm than good: in deploring deficits in primary students' performance in German and mathematics, they advocate postponing the teaching of EFL to grade 3. To revert to starting from year 3 would seem to be a knee-jerk reaction rather than a carefully considered suggestion. State governments are well advised to allow research projects and the dissemination of their results due time and to respect professional opinion before making hasty and far-reaching political decisions. More research is advisable and the respective results ought to inform curricula and methodological approaches. This research is needed since early FLL is a unique enterprise to which neither SLL insights nor experience with FLL at secondary level can be applied (Schmelter 2010, 35).

Rather than cutting down the contact time with English, exposure to English might be started in kindergarten. A number of studies points to the length of contact with the target language as a key factor determining successful language learning (Burmeister 2011, 196).

Researchers seem to agree that teacher qualification is another, if not the most essential constituent of successful EFL classes at primary school level. Edelenbos et al. conclude that an early start will only result in an improvement if teachers have at their disposal the complete range of necessary competences and skills (2006, 16).

Referring to the fields of speaking and the written skills, on which we focused in this article, a high language competence seems to be indispensable for teachers as they are the role models of pronunciation and intonation. Furthermore, sound methodological and diagnostic competence is mandatory in order to address the needs of highly heterogeneous groups of learners who should become acquainted with a variety of language learning strategies and techniques. Last but not least, teachers are to instil curiosity of target cultures and languages in young learners, which requires specific cultural and literary knowledge. With qualified teachers young learners are well able to reach the aims set out for FLL.

Consequently, the Council of Europe's decision that FLL should start as early as kindergarten and be considered as a basic skill should not be forgotten. Its demand to mobilise educational programmes to guarantee knowledge of "at least" one foreign language from primary level on (Europäische Kommission 1995, 20) should be maintained.
Works Cited


— "Lese- und Schreibleistungen von Grundschülern bei simultaner und zeitversetzter Alphabetisierung Deutsch und Englisch.” (to be published)


