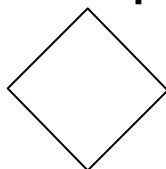


## experiential approach



Linda Thompson\*

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the rationale for the English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum for young language learners. Central to formal education, school and institution-based learning, is the provision of a structured learning environment which is generally deliberately organized around selected learning resources and aids to teaching. These constitute the language curriculum or syllabus. This paper outlines an experiential approach to the design of the ELT curriculum for young language learners (YLLs). This approach will be explored addressing the following issues:

1. *What do we know about how young children learn language?*
2. *How should children learn a new language in the nursery and kindergarten?*
3. *What is an appropriate ELT curriculum for young language learners?*
4. *Interrelated aspects of an ELT curriculum for young language learners*
5. *Teaching relevant skills through the medium of the target language*
6. *Teaching with a specific focus on English*
7. *Becoming a reader of English*
8. *ELT and concept development: learning mathematics*
9. *A child-centred ELT curriculum for YLLs*
10. *Teaching values and attitudes through ELT*
11. *ELT and creativity*
12. *ELT and emotional intelligence*
13. *Young language learners and the potential to become bilingual*
14. *ELT for Young Language Learners: the FOUNDATIONS of language education*

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\* University of Manchester, England.

To begin:

1. *What do we know about how young children learn language?*

We know that the neonate in the womb is already capable of distinguishing between different sounds and of responding to these in different ways. The human ear begins to develop 12 weeks after conception and from then on the neonate can recognize the mother's voice and can hear sounds of the mother's body functions, like heart beat, breathing etc. It is at this stage that the neonate begins to distinguish between sounds and can discern, for example, between pleasurable sounds like music and the less pleasurable such as noise. The neonate hears and reacts differently to these sounds in the environment. So already, before birth while still in the in the womb the foundations of language leaning have begun at this stage, the neonate is listening the world and is beginning to respond to it in rudimentary ways through movement. Later, these will combine to become the realisation of language as social action combining movements and reaction in a dynamic interactive symbiosis that becomes evident in the weeks after birth. At the same time at only a few weeks after birth visual discrimination is beginning for the young child. Babies can distinguish between numbers and can respond excitedly when the numbers of objects shown to them changes, particularly when it increases. This recent discovery suggests that the early conceptualization of number begins very early and coincides with the early of language development. So it is clear therefore, that learning begins early and that the learning process takes place with and that language is central.

There remains some controversy over whether learning ability, particularly learning language, is innate as Chomsky suggests, or whether it can be nurtured and fostered. The increase in our knowledge and understanding of the newborn baby begins to clarify this for us. There is indeed a great deal that is innate and biological related. The physical organs of speech production, hearing perception etc. are all necessary to language learning. However, these alone are not enough. Positive steps can be taken to stimulate and encourage the young child's curiosity, regardless of innate predisposition or biological endowment. That is why the approach to English language learning and teaching in the early years education advocated here should be holistic and combine learning development and health as equally important as a stimulating physical environment. Every child needs support from the environment if individual talent is to be nurtured. The people and places that the child interacts with are all very important factors for the YLL. Hence curriculum materials need to provide an integrated approach to ELT and should provide cognitive challenge as well as engagement with language for social interaction.

Recent findings from clinical medical research are helping us to realize just how competent the young child actually is. It is possible that in the past we have seriously underestimated the potential and capacities of YLLs. However, we also know that young children respond differently to tasks of equal cognitive challenge. Sometimes one child can complete the task successfully while another cannot. There are reasons for this. The most important thing for teachers and parents to remember is that we should engage YLLs in tasks that make sense to them. In other words, in ELT curriculum for YLLs should set tasks and include curriculum materials that portray things from the child's perspective and represent the child's view of the world. Research from the UK by Margaret Donaldson (1978) demonstrates that when children were asked to complete some of Piaget's early tasks, unlike Piaget's three original subjects, they were successful when the tasks was presented to them in a way that was meaningful for them and included contexts and situations that were familiar to them. When the child could relate the tasks to their own previous experiences they were more likely to be successful. Donaldson's approach has questioned the prevalence and dominance of Piaget's stages of development as the basis for education planning for young learners. Her works suggest that YLLs need to be presented with English language learning materials and situations that draw on their own life experiences, and familiar situations that reflect their immediate surroundings and the world in which they live. They need to be presented with tasks that make sense to them. The ELT curriculum materials for young language learners need to reflect the child's life, experiences and interests. However, while they should draw from the actual life experiences with which the child is familiar they should not stop there. They should use these as a basis for building and developing the child's experiences of life. So to return to our first questions: 'what do we know about how young children learn?' is: we know that young learners are supported in the learning process when the curriculum materials they are presented with reflect their own life experience, concerns, interests and perspective on the world. This of course, does not mean to suggest that the known and familiar are sufficient, merely that this should be the starting point for a structured ELT learning curriculum for YLLs in an early years education context of the nursery and kindergarten.

The second question is:

2. *How should children learn a new language in the nursery and kindergarten?*

We know that to be successful it is important for young children to be *actively engaged in their learning*. *Children are all individuals* and hence are all

very different. They have individual ideas, needs and abilities. Hence the ELT curriculum for young language learners in early learning environments needs to provide *a range of different learning opportunities* for children to learn. This means creating an environment where every child can flourish. Each child will then be able to find ways that best suit their own personality and each will learn different possible ways of doing things. ELT tasks should be designed as inclusive, providing engaging activities that every child, irrespective of abilities and aptitudes, background and interests can participate in. Hence the ELT curriculum for YLL needs to provide engagement for a differentiated abilities and levels of competence, thus providing structured support for children to learn at different rates and pace and importantly, in different ways.

As early years educators we are beginning to understand more about the social context and the importance of the environment for YLLS. The child's motivation, progress and engagement with the learning activity are highly individualized. Some children flourish in social situations, learning collectively through collaboration with others, while other children prefer some solitude and the opportunity to concentrate in private. The ELT curriculum for YLLs therefore needs to provide opportunities for different types of engagement; for individualized work when the YLL can concentrate, can practise and can work alone, as well as other types of organization when different types of language fulfilling different functions are required. This may include some opportunity for working in pairs with a selected or elected partner and for working as a member of a small group focused on a structured task that fosters collaboration. These different types of social groupings will require different types of social talk and provide a meaningful opportunity for the teacher to introduce talk for different social functions, for example, language for co-operating, sharing, negotiating, directing, explaining, questioning, working things out and getting tasks done. All of these organizations require different types of language. Different tasks also provide opportunities for meaningful language use with a focus on interaction and communication rather than on form and structure.

3. *What is an appropriate ELT curriculum for young language learners?*

To quote from the Catholic theologian and scholar, John Newman:

***Give me the child until he is seven and I will show you the man.***

Early learning take place at a rapid rate. It is frequently claimed that 60% of a child's learning takes place by the age of 5 years. While this detail may be disputed, the importance of learning before formal, institutionalized education begins is less contentious. Learning in more formal educational contexts like

the nursery and kindergarten is very different from learning in the home in a number of ways. Formal education has a tendency to emphasize subject specific learning and organizes the timetable, and hence the child's time accordingly, into lessons for science, mathematics writing etc. where each is regarded as a separate subject. However, for the young child, learning is holistic and not compartmentalized into separate areas of subject knowledge. Hence to be supportive learning activities need to be integrated and connected.

The foundations of all learning are laid during the very early years. Learning to read and write is more than merely learning to recognize the letters of the alphabet and their respective names. Learning to be literate is founded in early activities that may not be immediately related to the task in hand, for example, activities such as listening to music, singing songs, learning chants, reciting rhymes and playing musical instruments are known to be linked with success in more formal learning activities such as learning to read and to write. Listening to music helps children to build the skills of *auditory perception and discrimination*. These will help later with the learning of sound-letter relationships and the connection between spoken and written forms of language. This awareness of the sounds and form of language is frequently referred to as *metalinguistic awareness*. It provides the foundation for learning to read, learning to write and learning to spell. Being able to listen carefully, with concentration, for increasing periods of time, also helps the child to develop routines that are *influence other aspects of learning*. Research from the USA shows that when 6 year olds listened to music for 3-5 minutes at the beginning of each school session, their test scores for reading also improved significantly. One possible explanation for this is that learning activities in one field, in this case music, can impact upon learning in another domain, such as reading. Generic skills such as concentration and auditory perception learned and nurtured through one activity may be central and influential to others. This connection between domains of learning is characteristic of early years learning and important for YLLS.

#### 4. *Interrelated aspects of an ELT curriculum for young language learners*

Learning language in the early years is not separate from other social and cognitive learning. While leaning theories differ in their emphasis all recognize the close link between cognition and language. The psychologist Piaget links language development with stages of concept development while the social psychologist Vygotsky emphasizes the role of language in social mediation. Both however, concur on the interrelationship between language and other learning. While children are learning language, they are simultaneously learning

other things with and through the medium of language. A holistic ELT curriculum for YLLs therefore needs to use the target language as the medium of instruction for related learning, including:

- ?? Teaching English (forms, structures, sounds etc.) indirectly through language focused play activities;
- ?? Teaching specific knowledge about English (KAE)
- ?? Teaching relevant skills through the medium of English
- ?? Teaching subjects specific knowledge such as Mathematics, science etc. through the medium of English
- ?? Teaching associated concepts through the medium of English
- ?? Teaching attitudes to English both directly and indirectly
- ?? Teaching values both directly and indirectly

These can be summarised in the following diagram.

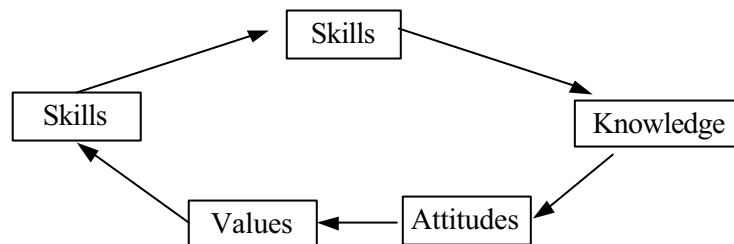


Diagram 1 – An overview of an integrated ELT curriculum for the early years

##### 5. *Teaching relevant skills through the medium of the target language*

There are a number of skills that young children need to learn. Some skills are related to formal ELT learning, like the development of motor skills, for example, learning to hold and use writing implements such as a pencil for writing, a crayon for colouring or a brush for painting. These are important however, other skills relate to social development and include learning to look after oneself, combing hair, brushing teeth, getting dressed, fastening laces, zips, buttons etc. are also important. These everyday personal skills allow the child to become independent and resourceful. While important in their own right, these skills also contribute to the child's readiness for less concrete and more abstract kinds of learning that formal education demands. The ability to manage oneself, to feed oneself and take care of personal needs can be taken as indicators of other learning, for example the development of fine and gross motor skills.

Both of which directly contribute to literacy. In addition to these skills relating to personal management and taking care of oneself, there are the social skills of learning to get along with other people, learning to be a member of the group, the class and school. It is important that YLLs are taught new skills that will be of immediate relevance and use. However, there are also other skills that need to be nurtured. Broadly speaking there are two types of skills that need to be fostered in the early years' curriculum. These are the skills for immediate, practical use and the skills that form the *foundations for later learning*. These will be explored more fully in Section 14.

#### 6. *ELT focus*

Learning new languages requires learning the vocabulary and structure of the language. For the YLL this is best achieved through normal, everyday activities in which they would ordinarily engage rather than formal teaching about the structure of the linguistic system. This could include activities for the YLLs such as singing songs, chanting rhymes and listening to stories. These activities are social practices that if repeated as part of the regular pattern and routine of daily life in the nursery or kindergarten quickly become established as normal and expected. Young children adapt quickly to routines. Set times each day for singing, listening and moving and dancing to music; learning new rhymes; listening to stories etc. help to engage the young learners in regular language learning activities. In this way the young learners can quickly begin to build a repertoire of songs, stories and other familiar texts. If they hear them frequently and are actively encouraged to participate in the retellings, recitations and renderings, they will begin to learn structures of the English language in a meaningful and enjoyable way. Once established, these patterns will be practised and hence learned by heart and eventually memorized. In this way they become part of the child's intuitive knowledge of the new linguistic system being learned.

These routine activities are not only valuable language learning activities in their own right but they also provide a sound basis for later literacy. They provide the opportunity for introducing the child to the shared cultural heritage of the community. It is inevitable that learning language means learning culture. Learning a new language may mean learning new cultural practices and values. Language is the medium of cultural transmission and hence plays a dual role. It socialises as well as educates. Language learning activities are inevitably joint endeavours, involving the child learning alongside a more experienced partner. Parents, family members, friends may fill this role as well as the early years educator and EL Teacher. These shared activities may be the young learner's

first experiences of early literacy, sharing books together with another, talking about the pictures and listening to stories. From these early experiences the broad foundations of later literacy are constructed. The YLL may easily memorize these texts that will eventually form the foundation repertoire of the child's literacy and literary experiences in English. Since many of these are texts related to early childhood experiences, if they are not learned as part of the early years ELT curriculum they may not be learned within the formal school language curriculum.

In addition to language texts associated with literary traditions and historic cultural, the YLL also needs to learn the language for immediate practical benefit. Hence will also need to learn a vocabulary of the everyday items. When English is also the language of instruction the YLL will also learn English for social purposes such as greetings, following simple instructions and directions from the teacher, responding to and eventually learning to ask questions etc. The grammatical structures of English learned through the naturalistic interactions when English is the medium of instruction in the ELT early years curriculum will provide YLLs with a secure oral proficiency and fluency that will contribute to the later learning of the written forms of English.

*Talking* is a very important part of language learning. It is also a prerequisite for later success in reading. Talking is central to concept development and abstract reasoning. Children gain confidence through learning to talk fluently to new companions, in new contexts. For the YLL oral proficiency precedes literacy. The psychologist Piaget identified the child's use of *private speech or speech for oneself* which he suggested the child uses as a way of getting to understand things better and coming to terms with the world in which they live. This kind of talk can be constructed by the child in a variety of ways:

- ? as a narrative
- ? as a monologue
- ? as a multi party or polyadic interaction or conversation
- ? through scripted drama and role play

In each of these scenarios the YLL can participate, create and re-create dialogues. Drama activities with the support of puppets can play an important part in the ELT curriculum. They can help to build a bridge for the child between private speech and shared interactions created in collaboration with others.

There are other ways in which opportunities for interaction can become part of the ELT for YLL. New technologies require people to be able to



communicate in different ways. Communicating the use of the telephone, voicemail, computers and email is now part of everyday life for an increasing number of people. These new ways of interacting have new rules of social use and have contributed to the creation of different types of texts. They are also an increasingly important feature of the formal school curriculum. It makes sense therefore, to incorporate these technologies into the ELT curriculum for YLLS. Early contact and experience with these technologies and appropriate language will facilitate later learning. While it is not feasible, or perhaps even desirable, for all children to have daily interactions with the new technologies, it is increasingly common for these to be found in homes and hence could become common place in the nursery and kindergarten.

#### 7. *Becoming a reader*

Success in learning to read is more rapid if the child develops a positive attitude towards books and reading. YLLs may already have some experience of sharing books in their first language. When this is the case it should be acknowledged and developed for introducing books in the target language English. However, with YLLs entering pre-school environments such as the nursery and kindergarten at an increasingly early age, this may not always be taken for granted. Irrespective of the language of the text the experience of reading and of handling, selecting and using books is important for young children. This can be fostered in a number of ways:

- ? ? by teaching the child an enjoyment of books
- ? ? by showing the child how to handle books with care, turning pages, storing the books on shelves and in bookcases
- ? ? by developing an awareness of print in the environment in the form of labels around the nursery and in non-book forms like magazines, newspaper, posters etc. by helping the child to distinguish between print and illustrations and understanding that both convey meanings
- ? ? by identifying the names of the letters of the alphabet, particularly those one letter words I and A, a.
- ? ? by teaching a sight vocabulary of the most frequently occurring words in early story books

All of these help to create an environment where the printed text becomes familiar and common place. The creation of a print rich environment as central to an ELT curriculum for YLLs contributes to communicative language teaching.

#### 8. *ELT and learning mathematics*

As well as learning language and becoming literate, young children are increasingly introduced to the study of other specific areas of subjects study, particularly mathematics and science. These subjects have their own register or subject specific language, or use language that the YLL may already know but with new mathematics meanings. This specific language of mathematics is central to the early study of mathematics as a subject and is the foundation for later conceptual development. Terms already familiar to the young learner may assume specific meaning in the context of the mathematics curriculum. The inclusion of mathematics as a specific subject for study in the ELT curriculum for YLLs will provide opportunities that combine ELT with subject study and cognitive engagement. A range of tasks that integrate the language of mathematics with language activities could include some of the following:

- ?? counting
- ?? recognition of numbers names and symbols
- ?? three dimensional shapes
- ?? patterns
- ?? colours
- ?? sorting and categorising
- ?? conceptual operations such as addition and subtraction, multiplication etc
- ?? introducing money and other currencies
- ?? telling the time

These, like other knowledge can be taught through carefully structured learning tasks, including games and activity based learning. Suitable curriculum materials and carefully planned ELT could provide direct instruction, together with plenty of opportunities for YLLs to practise what they have been taught.

#### 9. *A child-centred ELT curriculum for YLLs*

Children learn to read more easily if they are within an environment that provides regular routines. This means *daily practice* that builds on previous learning. An appropriate ELT curriculum for YLLs should provide a learning continuum that maximises what the child can already do and extends this, through planned intervention by the teacher, to provide new learning experiences that allow the child to extend what they already know and bring about new learning. This builds the curriculum around what the individual child already knows and can do. This gives the ELT curriculum for YLLs a child centred focus.

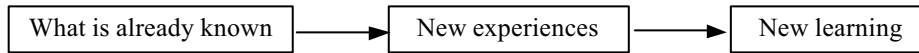


Diagram 2 – A child centred ELT curriculum for YLLs

This cycle of known-to-new should permeate planning for the ELT curriculum for YLLS. It is a principle that can be applied to any early years' curriculum and is not necessarily unique to ELT. It can be applied to the child's development across all aspects of learning skills, knowledge and concepts.

#### 10. *Teaching values and attitudes through ELT*

The process of teaching, whether it is the informal teaching that takes place within the family or the more formal education that takes place within formal education is centrally concerned with the transmission of culture and values. These can be and frequently are directly taught. However, values can also be part of what is sometimes referred to as the invisible curriculum (Mehan, 1978) or the silent curriculum, meaning that the values are inherited in the organization of the curriculum, the choice of teaching materials and other aspects of the planned organization of the educational institution. The inclusion of ELT in the curriculum for YLLs is a statement of values, just as the absence of English or another foreign language can also be a statement of different values. Learning tasks can, and perhaps should be planned and designed to inculcate specific values and attitudes.

For YLLs these might include:

- ?? developing a sense of self-worth and self-esteem;
- ?? recognising what is right from what is wrong;
- ?? learning self-discipline and self-control;
- ?? motivation;
- ?? showing care and consideration for others;
- ?? working independently as well as being a member of a group;
- ?? learning that it is not always possible to win or be the first or the best;
- ?? accepting failure as sometimes inevitable;
- ?? taking turns;
- ?? establishing working relationships with key adults as well as other children;
- ?? learning when to take the lead and when to follow others.

These values may be taught implicitly in the choice of the tasks and structured learning activities designed to become part of the ELT curriculum for

YLLS. It is important to emphasize, whether these are taught overtly or not they may be implicit in the ELT curriculum for YLLS.

#### 11. *ELT and creative development*

Every child should be encouraged to maximize their creativity and imaginative. This can be achieved in a variety of ways. The main activities for creative development are in the activities of art, music, listening to stories, imaginative play. It is through these activities that the YLL learns:

1. to observe what others do
2. to begin to learn from what they observe others doing
3. to get to know the world around them through experiencing at first hand, exploring and experimenting

Activities for supporting creative development include:

- ? ? singing
- ? ? dancing
- ? ? playing and responding to musical instruments
- ? ? art work including painting, model making, collage or the puppets for drama activities
- ? ? listening to and participating in oral storytelling
- ? ? imaginative play alone and with others
- ? ? listening to music and the sounds of different musical instruments,
- ? ? learning to dance and respond to music through movements (e.g. clapping, beating a rhythmic tune)

These activities are all related to learning language and could form part of a well planned ELT curriculum for YLLS.

#### 12. *ELT and emotional intelligence*

All of the ELT activities outlined in this paper teach more than just the English language. The learning of any language is increasingly linked to other domains of personal, social and intellectual development. An area of increasing recent interest has been that of emotional intelligence. Learning languages and the activities described here help to *foster creativity* but they do much more than this. They help to boost the child's *confidence and self-esteem*. These are two factors that are important in later learning when it becomes necessary to take a chance, go into new territory, to explore the unknown and to take risks. Risk taking sometimes leads to mistakes. This is inevitable and this too, is a valuable lesson for children to learn. Attitudes to risk taking and other facets of emotional

intelligence can be encouraged early. Making mistakes, being confident enough to take a chance, and not being afraid to get things wrong sometimes are all important *elements frequently associated with learning foreign languages and with success in later life*. These are values and attitudes that children learn in and *through* their experiences in the nursery and kindergarten. Young learners can learn these skills indirectly through activities that teach and promote language development. These include participation in role-play and both spontaneous and scripted drama activities. While nurturing emotional intelligence is not a feature unique to the ELT curriculum for YLLs learning languages in the early years can contribute to the development of emotional intelligence.

*13. Learning languages early and the potential of becoming bilingual*

There is strong research evidence to suggest that learning more than one language in early childhood carries considerable advantages for the learner (and society). Some of these gains are of immediate benefit to the young child. These include greater cognitive capacity, emotional growth as well as social development. There are also longer term economic gains for both the individual and their society in being bilingual. The foundations of language are laid in the early years and if full bilingual potential is to be realised it is very important that learning the second (and subsequent) language begins as early as possible. Since the number of children who have the potential to become bilingual is increasing, the early years ELT curriculum should include activities that are not bound to a particular language system. For example, picture-talk activities can provide opportunities for oral language tasks that can be conducted in the child's first language, as well as the target language. The ELT curriculum for YLLs should aim to include learning activities and teaching materials that can be used for parallel teaching in both English and the mother-tongue or home language. This approach will consolidate learning in both languages and will provide maximum opportunity for the YLL to practise and consolidate learning. Beginning ELT early may also contribute to the opportunity for YLLs to become highly proficient or even bilingual. There is strong research evidence to suggest that the younger the child is when language learning begins, the greater the chances are of eventual bilingualism.

*14. Early years education: the FOUNDATIONS of lifelong learning*

In summary, it can be said that the ideas an ELT curriculum for YLLs expounded here are founded in the belief that learning foreign languages in the

nursery and kindergarten has the potential to do more than merely teach. It simultaneously lays the foundations of the child's later learning patterns in language and other domains. The acronym FOUNDATIONS illustrates the main tenets of the rationale for an ELT curriculum for YLLs as the foundation for language education. Learning languages in the early years of life contributes to general learning and education indirectly through nurturing aspects of individual self-confidence, self-esteem and by increasing common sense knowledge and understanding of the world in which young learners live their lives.

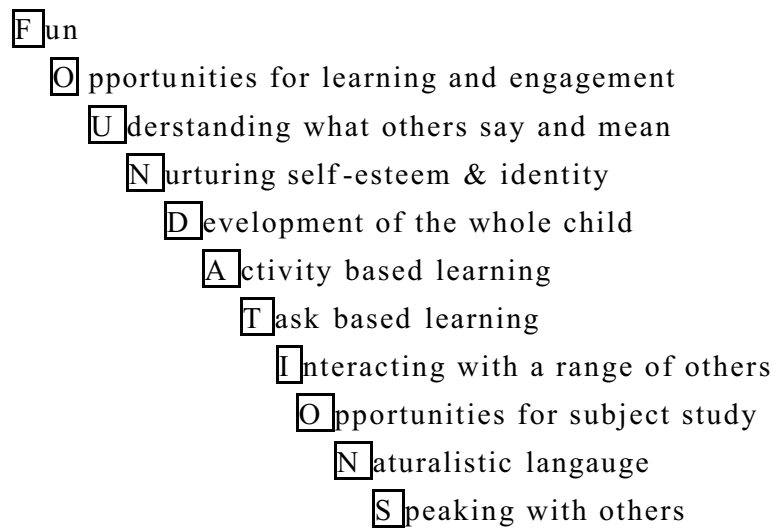


Diagram 3 – ELT in the nursery and Kindergarten: An experiential approach

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