

Annett Kaminski

University of Kaiserslautern-Landau, Germany

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8669-8635>

a.kaminski@rptu.de

Introducing pre-schoolers and first graders to English: Pre-service teachers' insights

This study focuses on the teaching of English as a foreign language to very young learners aged between five and seven years. In particular, it investigates which aspects pre-service teachers identify as challenging before and after their classroom experience as part of their teaching-based master's dissertation. Applying thematic analysis, three different types of data for three pre-service teachers are examined: Firstly, their brainstorming notes written down before they started teaching, secondly their reflections on their teaching as expressed in their master's dissertation and thirdly their thoughts as articulated in follow-up interviews. Findings of this small-scale study suggest that reflection on extended classroom practice can help pre-service teachers to gain a better understanding of their learners' specific needs and to adapt their lessons accordingly.

Keywords: pre-primary and primary EFL, teacher education, reflective practice

Słowa kluczowe: nauczanie języka angielskiego jako obcego na poziomie przedszkolnym i szkoły podstawowej, kształcenie nauczycieli, refleksyjna praktyka



1. Introduction

According to the latest Eurydice report that covers 39 education systems in 37 European countries, 86.1% of primary school children are taught a foreign language (FL), with the vast majority of children learning English in pre- and primary school in Europe (Eurydice, 2023). Foreign language learners have also become younger, as about 66% of education systems in Europe have lowered the starting age at which FL learning is compulsory (Eurydice, 2023). There is an increasing number of countries where children start learning their first FL below the age of six to eight years, such as Belgium, Luxembourg, Poland, Greece, Cyprus and Malta (Eurydice, 2023). Outside of Europe, a similar picture has emerged (Shin, Savić, Machida, 2021; Copland, Garton, Barnett, 2024). This trend has implications for teacher education.

In Germany where this study was carried out, the nature and start of FL teaching at primary level varies in different regions. At the time of data collection, there were three federal states where FL learning started in Grade 1, among them Rhineland-Palatinate (RP), which is the focus of this paper. Here, FL sessions amount to 50 minutes a week, held by either a specialist primary EFL teacher or a generalist primary teacher. In pre-primary settings, however, FL learning is currently not compulsory in Germany. Child-care provision varies from one region to the next, but generally there are kindergartens for children aged between 1 to 6 years of age, with the last year dedicated to developing school preparedness through pre-school activities. Although pre-school curricula do not exist, there are recommendations for developing literacy and numeracy skills, for fostering artistic, musical, fine and gross motor skills as well as for introducing children to science, ethics and religion. With regard to literacy, FLs and intercultural awareness are mentioned in the guidelines in RP (Ministerium für Bildung Rheinland-Pfalz, 2018). As part of their educational programme, early years practitioners, who complete a childcare course at specialised colleges, may therefore decide to introduce four- or five-year-old children to English. Pre-service primary school teachers (PTs) receive their teacher education at university, separate from early years specialists. However, they are often encouraged to spend some time in a kindergarten in order to gain some insights into what children learn before they enter school aged five to six.

There is still insufficient knowledge about the teaching of English to children before formal schooling (Alexiou, 2020; Mourão, Ellis, 2020). Yet, early FL programmes are sometimes implemented before well-designed teacher education programmes can be established, causing considerable challenges for the education system (Ellis, 2019). This paper aims to address

this issue of teacher education by examining PTs' views on challenging aspects of teaching five- to seven-year-old FL learners before and after their teaching experience, in order to identify how teacher educators can equip PTs with the necessary skills to manage these.

2. Literature review: Very young FL learners and teacher education

Very young FL learners in pre-school or at the beginning of primary school share a number of characteristics: They are not familiar with formal schooling, or in the case of first graders, they might not be fully accustomed to it. Although often very interested in the written word, they have not yet developed proficient reading and writing skills in their first language (L1). Traditional language teacher education, however, with its focus on the written word is unlikely to sufficiently prepare language teachers to cater for the specific needs of pre-school children or children at the beginning of primary school (Mourão, Ellis, 2020). Time and time again, it has been pointed out that teachers working with very young FL learners need to have the expertise to organize activities that are age-appropriate, tap into children's inclination for pretend play and allow for holistic learning (Halliwell, 1992; Cameron, 2001; Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek, 2006; Enever, 2016; Read, 2016; Alexiou, 2020). An essential teacher knowledge base (TKB) for FL teachers working in early L2 settings should therefore include early childhood teacher competences (Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022: 46), with sound knowledge of childhood development forming one element of general pedagogical knowledge. In the following, key aspects of child development will be highlighted in order to illustrate their impact on the learning and teaching of a FL.

2.1. Teaching very young FL learners

Within the domain of early years education, Piaget's and Vygotsky's theories on cognitive and social development as well as the role of imaginary play have been influential to this day (Macblain, 2020). Even if Piaget's theory of cognitive development with its four clearly defined stages and age ranges may seem somewhat "rigid" and "deterministic" nowadays (Pinter, 2017: 9), the fact that children in the same age band share similar behaviour and abilities is generally acknowledged within the domain of child development research (e.g., Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016). Very young English learners aged between five and seven years are mostly in the pre-operational stage

of cognitive development, which is characterized by symbolic thinking, egocentrism and pretend play, with the latter being regarded as a major source for learning within the Zone of Proximal Development (Piaget, Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978). These characteristics distinguish five- to seven-year-olds from slightly older primary-school learners of eight to ten years, who are in the process of developing logical reasoning and adult-like thinking.

With regard to FL learning, this means that teachers cannot expect pre-schoolers or first graders to analyse language yet (Pinter, 2017). Therefore, teachers cannot fall back on the written word or a teaching style that uses analysis of grammatical features for learners to understand underlying structures - simply applying a “watered-down secondary syllabus” (Cameron, 2001: xiii). However, these very young learners can utilize implicit learning similar to L1 acquisition, memorizing individual words as well as prefabricated and unanalysed chunks, and using their procedural knowledge to reproduce them (Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). Learners can also be encouraged to discover patterns, such as noticing the ending *-s* for plural forms (Brewster, Ellis, Girard, 2002). Teachers, on the other hand, can address children’s attraction to imaginary play and dressing up by using stories and make-believe activities to develop their listening and speaking skills (Halliwell, 1992).

Another issue that is relevant for teaching purposes is children’s ability to concentrate over longer stretches of time and to follow instructions. With the start of pre-school, children are increasingly able to stay focused for longer (Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016), and so may listen intently for extended periods of time during story read-alouds (Mourão, Ellis, 2020). However, there is a great change in ability to ignore off-task information between six to 10 years of age (Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016), and therefore children at the lower end of this age range may get distracted, lose interest in school assignments or find it difficult to follow multi-step instructions, which teachers need to consider when designing activities (e.g., Shin, Savić, Machida, 2021).

For teaching, children’s social-emotional as well as physical behaviour are also relevant. When planning pair or group work, for example, it helps to know that five-year-olds may not be able to see someone else’s point of view, due to their egocentric world view (Piaget, 1959). When planning artwork activities, on the other hand, teachers must remember that pre-primary children are still developing fine-motor skills, and may need support and extra time for cutting with scissors or colouring-in and drawing, and that in general, five-year-olds are more likely to be physically very active and unwilling to sit down for a longer stretch of time (Shin, Savić, Machida, 2021).

2.2. Early years FL programmes

Publications on early years FL programmes highlight at least three aspects that are instrumental for ensuring successful FL learning in early childhood.

Firstly, young children's characteristic developmental traits mean that a formal setting reminiscent of traditional (secondary) FL classrooms does not provide an age-appropriate learning environment, which has implications not only for the design of activities or teaching material but also for the physical set-up of the learning environment, which should include toys, games, stories and picturebooks, for example (Halliwell, 1992; Brewster, Ellis, Girard, 2002; Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek, 2006; Mourão, 2014). The success of pre-school FL programmes, which also implies children's positive wellbeing, seems to be linked to the pedagogical approach. While children have been found to show considerable levels of stress in "lesson-like" sessions "in an unfamiliar room, with unfamiliar teachers, in an unfamiliar language" (Thieme, et al., 2022: 339), this was not the case when a play-based approach was used with games, songs and stories (Thieme, et al., 2022). However, when it comes to the incorporation of play, there is an increasing tendency to restrict it to very structured activities led by the teacher who uses play for "consolidating pre-established academic learning outcomes" (Waddington, 2023:13) rather than providing opportunities for child-initiated play in English learning areas equipped with materials such as picturebooks and games (Mourão, 2014).

Secondly, strict language policies lower participation and motivation levels in children and ultimately have a negative impact on children's wellbeing (Thieme, et al., 2022). In a similar way, overuse of rote memorization and overfocus on nativelike pronunciation has been linked to FL anxiety in pre-school EFL learners (Kiaer, Morgan-Brown, Choi, 2021). A flexible language policy that allows for switching to children's L1 to make full use of all available semiotic resources, alongside age-appropriate, meaning-focused, multi-sensory and hands-on activities in an informal context, seem to be essential ingredients for ensuring children's positive wellbeing and their participation (Kirsch, Seele, 2020; Kiaer, Morgan-Brown, Choi, 2021).

Thirdly, the rate of progress in FL learning is linked to age, which means that younger learners take longer and educators need to adjust their expectations of how quickly pre-school children can improve their FL language skills. More time is needed for experiencing, understanding and retrieving FL samples in a meaningful and engaging way (Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023).

2.3. Teacher education for early years FLT

Ideally, educators who teach English to very young children acquire the combined skills of an early years' practitioner, who has a sound understanding of children of this age group, and of a language teacher, who is a confident English speaker with knowledge of how a FL is acquired. These combined skills are needed to harness young children's age-specific abilities and behavioural traits for language learning, while always having the whole child in mind (Blondin, et al., 1998; Enever, 2016; Read, 2016; Rokita-Jaśkow, Ellis, 2019; Mourão, Ellis, 2020; Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022; Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023). Of course, within early EFL settings, some teachers of English may have trained as early years' practitioners for pre-school while others studied EFL, maybe with the prospect of teaching upper-primary or secondary school children. For each of these two distinct professional pathways, often described as non-specialist or specialist teacher respectively, various challenges have been identified.

A degree programme in early years, for example, may not provide sufficient language training for educators to competently and confidently use the FL (Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022). On the other hand, educators with a background in EFL teaching, though more proficient users of the FL, may lack the necessary understanding of young children's abilities, characteristic behaviour and specific needs (Rokita-Jaśkow, Ellis, 2019). FL teachers are often "trained to use a board and to plan their lessons around the written word" (Mourão, Ellis, 2020: 10), and may therefore be overly concerned with linguistic competence while ignoring other key development areas, such as personal, social and emotional development, problem solving, reasoning and numeracy, knowledge and understanding of the world, as well as physical and creative development. Building a culture of cooperation between specialist EFL teachers and non-specialist EFL early years practitioners has been proposed as a promising solution to this problem (Alexiou, 2020).

Moreover, if teacher education programmes (TEP) do not allow PTs to gain extensive teaching experience, they will lack the opportunity to develop basic teaching routines or skills to manage unforeseen situations (Griffiths, 2023). Degree schemes need to prepare PTs for real classroom situations that are both dynamic and complex. By synthesizing what is sometimes seen as opposites, namely the theory and the practice of teaching FLs through reflection and extended classroom experience, PTs are more likely to acquire the necessary skills to handle critical incidents (Ur, 2019; Griffiths, 2023).

3. The study

3.1. Research aims and questions

This paper sets out to explore the following questions:

1. What aspects do PTs identify as challenging in the teaching of English to pre-primary or primary learners in Grade 1 before and after their teaching-based dissertation?
2. In which way do PTs' expectations differ from their reflections on actual classroom experience?

3.2. Context

In Rhineland-Palatinate, pre-service teachers who complete their pre-service teacher education programme (TEP) in order to teach children aged between five and ten years of age, start taking pedagogic classes with a focus on this age range in their third year of the bachelor phase, after two years of studying two major subjects, such as German and arts, and also attending general pedagogic courses. In the third and final year of the bachelor phase, PTs who did not study English as their major subject attend one language and one phonetics class respectively. On successful completion of the bachelor phase, PTs enter the master phase, which spans two semesters at university and comprises classes on didactics in the various subject areas, including EFL. As part of the EFL module in the master phase, which is offered to both generalist as well as specialist EFL students, PTs take one lecture on teaching English to young learners (TEYL) and one seminar with a special focus on either using children's literature, or cultural aspects in TEYL. Both are taught in 90-minute weekly sessions over one semester, which is 14 weeks long. Pre-service teachers learn about L1 and L2 acquisition, about young learners' characteristics and the importance of a holistic and multi-sensory learning environment. They get to know various teaching methods and techniques, such as Total Physical Response, and are introduced to good practice principles, such as the use of age-appropriate materials and activities, including stories, songs and games. In their seminar, a simulation exercise is used to encourage pre-service teachers to apply their knowledge about TEYL. In groups, they design a whole unit of about five sessions around a topic of their choice. They search for and create their own teaching material and then teach a mini demo lesson to their peers, which is followed by feedback from their fellow students, as well as their teacher educator. The teaching of this demo lesson is a requirement to register for the exam.

Some PTs decide to write their master dissertation on early EFL, which is teaching-based and involves spending a period of four to five weeks in a primary school, or a pre-school setting. Pre-service teachers observe a learner group before they plan and teach a unit that comprises 10 English sessions, for example around a picturebook, or songs. In line with recommendations for Practitioner Research, they keep a teaching diary, a record of learners' progress and, if possible, also record classroom discourse in order to reflect on their experience (Burns, 2010; Farrell, 2018). Pre-service teachers are also encouraged to take notes on discussions with the class teacher, who observes their lessons and provides feedback for reflection. The idea is to make PTs aware of the use of several data sources for data-led reflection – covering written and spoken, as well as individual and collaborative accounts of reflection (Walsh, Mann, 2015). As part of the supervision process, PTs complete a brainstorming activity before their teaching and talk about their insights afterwards.

3.3. Participants

This study focuses on three PTs on the primary TEP who decided either to work in a pre-school or a primary EFL setting. Since pre-service teachers tend to be allocated to slightly older learners in primary school and rarely choose to teach in a pre-primary context, there is little data on this age group. All three PTs conducted their EFL teaching between spring 2020 and autumn 2022, with two of them being affected by the pandemic - hence the small class size for two of the groups and lower number of lessons (Table 1). One PT worked at pre-school level, the other two in a Grade 1 group. Learners were between five to seven years old. The PTs used a variety of activities to offer a holistic learning experience to their learners. Two PTs focused on songs and incorporated artwork and games. One PT designed an EFL unit around a picturebook, including a drama activity, a science experiment and artwork.

Table 1. Pre-service teachers, their learners, teaching material (own study)

	PT1	PT2	PT3
EFL context	Pre-school	Year 1	Year 1
No of sessions	10	10	5
Age of learners (yrs)	5-6	6-7	6-7
No of YLs (male/female)	4 (4/0)	21 (9/12)	4 (2/2)
Time of teaching	April-May 2021	Nov.-Dec. 2022	May 2020

Table 1 – cont.

	PT1	PT2	PT3
YLS' prior EFL experience	none	none	7 months, 50 mins/ week
Main material	songs	songs	picturebook
Activities	Imaginary journey to London Talking to class mascot Singing Games	Singing Artwork Making music Games	Shared read-aloud Artwork Science experiment Drama

3.4. Instruments

Pre-service teachers' brainstorming documents, their written reflections as well as full transcripts of their audio-recorded follow-up interviews were analysed using guidelines for reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke, 2022). In particular, these three types of data were screened for remarks on critical or unexpected incidents. Extracts from all three sources of data were collected in one document. Then, these extracts were searched for similar wording in PTs' comments across the different data sources in order to generate themes.

3.5. Procedures

Three different types of data were analysed for every PT to allow for triangulation: their brainstorming notes before teaching, their written reflections on their teaching practice and audio-recordings of follow-up interviews. Neither the brainstorming document nor the follow-up interviews were part of the assessment and were used to counterbalance any potential bias in the written reflections from the PTs' master dissertations.

As part of the brainstorming activity, PTs were prompted to write down what experience they expected to gain, which aspects they felt prepared or ill-prepared for, their thoughts on keeping a teaching diary, and which challenges they expected with regard to teaching and academic writing (Appendix). Not included in this analysis are any problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic that they anticipated. For the second data source, PTs' written reflections taken from their master's dissertation provided data on PTs' analysis of their own teaching. These reflections were based on the teaching diary that PTs kept and on the analyses of their learners' work,

as well as of recorded classroom discourse – normally three to four short stretches of approximately 10 minutes. The third type of data, follow-up interviews, which lasted between 18 to 24 minutes, were collected during the feedback session after completion and assessment of their master’s dissertation, about five months after the teaching experience. They offered an opportunity for each PT to revisit and elaborate on their initial thoughts from the brainstorming exercise and to discuss their insights with the researcher – continuing the process of reflection through a collaborative and dialogic approach (Walsh, Mann, 2015). Non-directive in nature, interviewer guidance was minimal in order to counteract asymmetrical power distribution, and to elicit extended answers that would provide a rich data source (Mishler, 1986; Dörnyei, 2007).

3.6. Findings

Based on the first data source, three themes could be generated (Table 2). In their brainstorming documents, all three PTs referred to aspects of lesson planning, which were closely linked to anticipating learner behaviour. They expressed concern that their lesson plan might not be adequate in terms of time allocated to activities (PT1) or of arranging content (PT3) due to a lack of understanding of what their young learners can or cannot do (PT1). There was also some insecurity about how to respond if their lesson did not work according to plan (PT2). All of them also referred to real classroom experience and adequate response, noting that they felt ill-prepared in that respect and hoped to “experience teaching first-hand” (PT3), to learn how to respond flexibly in unexpected situations (PT1), and how to deal with young learners who show frustration (PT2). Two pre-service teachers (PT1 and PT3) also mentioned their research skills and their role as a teacher as potential areas for improvement.

Table 2. Brainstorming before teaching (own study)

Themes	Examples of PTs’ brainstorming notes, my translation
Lesson planning & anticipating YL behaviour	<p>I am hoping to learn from my mistakes with lesson planning [...] the challenge might be that my lesson plan is either too short or too long and I cannot anticipate what children can do. PT1</p> <p>I hope to learn more about what is important for lesson planning [...] What do I do if my lesson does not go according to plan? [...] it might be a challenge if the lesson does not go as I anticipated. PT2</p>

Table 2 – cont.

Themes	Examples of PTs' brainstorming notes, my translation
	Hopefully, I can gain more experience of how to design lessons and adapt them throughout a unit [...] There was no proper preparation with regard to planning lessons, arranging content and adjusting to learners. PT3
Real classroom experience & adequate response	<p>My hope is to learn how to respond spontaneously and flexibly in unexpected situations [...] What do I do if a child has a medical emergency? [...] What do I do if I suspect that the child is being abused? PT1</p> <p>I hope to learn how I can deal with YLs' frustration. And how to optimize my teaching [...] It might be a challenge when children are distracted by a learner acting like a clown. PT2</p> <p>I am looking forward to the opportunity to try out teaching techniques [...] and in general, I hope for more practical experience, meaning experiencing teaching first-hand [...] PT3</p>
Reflection & analysis of own teaching	<p>Using a diary, you can be honest, since nobody else will read it, and when you write it down immediately after teaching, you can keep something that you might forget otherwise [...] The challenge will be: How do I articulate my insights in an academic way? PT1</p> <p>I can get to know myself in the role of a teacher and I can learn to reflect on my teaching [...] The teaching diary can help to collect thoughts in a structured way and [...] to identify strengths and weaknesses [...]. PT3</p>

On the basis of the second type of data, PTs' written reflections, three themes could be generated (Table 3), two of which had already been identified in the brainstorming documents and will be highlighted in the following. With regard to lesson planning and anticipating learner behaviour, PTs' comments indicate that they either expected too little or too much, about which they often expressed surprise. On the one hand, PTs did not expect YLs to be able to recognize English (PT1), to imitate the teacher so quickly (PT2), or to make observations about language and the world (PT3). On the other hand, PTs seemed to think that their learners should be able to do more, for example when YLs were expected to coordinate several things at the same time, to follow several instructions (PT2 & PT3) and to finish tasks quickly (PT3). Repeatedly, PTs explain that the problems with anticipating YL behaviour caused time management issues: They had to adjust their lesson plans by rephrasing instructions, or breaking an activity down into smaller units, and they also had to allocate more time for a certain activity.

The written reflections also refer to real classroom experience and finding an adequate response. PTs' comments show that they had to deal with situations that needed an instant response, which they found challenging. Pre-service teachers' observations indicate that through these critical incidents they understood the importance of physical activity for their YLs (PT1), YLs' use of their L1 as a default function (PT2), their inclination to imitate the teacher (PT3), and the need for repetition, as well as visualisation (PT2 & PT3).

Table 3. Post-teaching written reflections (own study)

Themes	Examples from PTs' master's dissertations, my translation
Lesson planning & anticipating YL behaviour	<p>Based on the transcriptions, one can note that the children could identify what was said as English [...] PT1</p> <p>They could remember the words really well because the second time they heard the song, they could sing along. PT2</p> <p>They tried to say the lines of the dialogue [...] but one could see that they had enough to do with listening and miming actions. PT2</p> <p>It was surprising to hear such an explanation from a first grader [...] (refers to experiment with balloon) PT3</p> <p>As the first group was singing, it was the next groups' turn, but they were overwhelmed and did not know any more what they had to do. PT3/singing in canon</p> <p>In the following artwork session, time management was a problem again. It took 10 minutes for the children to get their box and glue. PT3</p>
Real classroom experience & adequate response	<p>In the first lessons, it became obvious that the learners had the urge to move about, and I tried to adjust to that in the following sessions. PT1</p> <p>Some children mixed up the word 'name' and used the German pronunciation for it. [...] This difficulty could only be solved through repeating everything a few times. PT2</p> <p>Once he had picked a picture, one could notice that he had problems saying it in English. In order to avoid frustration, I invited him to get help from a friend. PT2</p> <p>In contrast to my observations, I noticed when listening to the recordings that learners [...] increasingly imitated me and spoke English unprompted. PT3</p>

Table 3 – cont.

Themes	Examples from PTs' master's dissertations, my translation
	In hindsight, it would have been better to show the experiment a second time [...] and to add a drawing on the board. PT3
Yls response to multimodal features	<p>Leaving the room after class, one child was chanting the lines rhythmically. PT1</p> <p>The recordings showed that some children started singing in certain situations during class. PT2</p> <p>One teacher said that learners had talked about the balloon flying through the room [...] PT3</p>

The third source of data, the transcriptions of the follow-up interviews, reveal that PTs again referred to lesson planning and anticipating YL behaviour, real classroom experience and adequate response alongside references to their own reflection process and suggestions for pre-service teacher education.

In the follow-up interviews, PTs placed more emphasis on the adjustments they had made in order to address their YLs' needs (Table 4). For example, with regard to lesson planning and anticipating YL behaviour, PTs stressed that they incorporated more physical activities (PT1), or that they addressed YLs' shorter concentration span by keeping activities shorter (PT1), or by giving them more time or extra support (PT2). The problems with lesson planning that PTs experienced is attributed to a lack of planning whole units during previous internships (PT3).

Regarding real classroom experience, PTs explained how they stopped an activity when their pre-schoolers showed dislike (PT1) and how they had to become stricter in response to misbehaviour (PT2). Feeling ill-prepared for classroom management, especially in a situation when the children and their classroom rituals were unknown, was an observation shared by PT3, whose learners were from different Year groups during emergency teaching in 2020.

Pre-service teachers also commented on reflecting on their own teaching. Alongside the diary, which was acknowledged as helpful, PT1 stressed the importance of sharing observations and thoughts about teaching with colleagues. There were suggestions for notetaking during a busy day at school (PT2) and the realisation that their TEP had not provided the opportunity to learn about how to conduct research in a school setting (PT3).

Table 4. Follow-up interviews (own study)

Theme	Examples of PTs' interview contributions, my translation
Lesson planning & anticipating YL behaviour	<p>After the first or second lesson, I wrote in my teaching diary that I used too few activities where learners can move about [...] and I could improve my lesson plans and use more physical activities. PT1</p> <p>When I noticed, okay, the children cannot concentrate for 30 minutes, I cut down activities to 25 minutes and I used more physical activity [...] I adjusted that in line with the previous lesson. PT1</p> <p>They couldn't pronounce it and after repeating it a few times, I left it at that because I did not want them to lose motivation [...] and then I tried again on another day. PT2</p> <p>[...] what helped me a lot was using gestures and facial expressions [...] PT2 about YLs asking for word meanings</p> <p>It was never about teaching a whole unit on one topic [...] which content to do first and how to go from there [...] PT3/ commenting on previous internships</p>
Real classroom experience & adequate response	<p>[...] once, when a game did not work and the children did not enjoy it, I stopped the activity [...] and the early years practitioner who was sitting in the back [...] gave me positive feedback for that. PT1</p> <p>[...] in one lesson, the teacher left the room [...] and then one or two children tried to be louder [...] when they did not listen, I had to be stricter [...] PT2</p> <p>[...] seminars at uni prepared me for activities [...] around picturebooks [...] but not classroom management [...] especially when you did not know the children and didn't know which rituals they were used to [...] PT3</p>
Reflection & analysis of own teaching	<p>What I found even more helpful than the teaching diary was actually talking to the teachers who were sitting in the back because they saw things I had not noticed. PT1</p> <p>[...] I couldn't sit down and write down everything after each lesson, so I quickly took a few notes on my mobile phone [...] and in the evening a bit more, and thought about what had happened and why. PT2</p> <p>What I noticed was [...] that I had not had any experience with doing research as part of my previous university programme [...] PT3</p>

4. Discussion

This study examined firstly what aspects PTs identified as challenging when teaching English to pre-primary learners or first graders before and after their teaching experience, and secondly how far PTs' views changed through reflecting on their own teaching practice. The analysis of three types of data suggests that PTs share a concern for lesson planning, which they link to the ability of anticipating learners' behaviour. PTs also identify a lack of classroom experience as challenging for how to respond appropriately in school settings, and demonstrate an awareness of reflection as a means to improve their own teaching practice.

4.1. Perceived challenges before and after teaching practice

Pre-service teachers' brainstorming data, their written reflections and their contributions in the follow-up interviews indicate that they consider themselves insufficiently prepared for lesson planning, anticipating learner behaviour and managing unexpected situations in classrooms. These findings echo criticism of teacher education in the past (Blondin, et al., 1998; Enever, 2016), but they also confirm results of a recent study that examined TEPs for pre-school, which show that classroom management and lesson planning were found to be least represented alongside knowledge of context, albeit in a different European context (Pérez, Robles, Soto, 2022). While a focus on classroom management during pre-service teacher education would provide PTs with some strategies for handling critical situations, solid knowledge of context would perhaps lead to a better understanding of learners and hence make it easier for PTs to anticipate learner behaviour.

Learner behaviour that PTs found difficult to anticipate correctly, such as when using multi-tasking, listening over an extended period of time without being physically active, or with little visual support, refer to big milestones in child development, and, in particular, developmental changes that occur around the age of six to seven. This indicates that although PTs are taught about child development as part of their university education, they still lack a deeper understanding of these developmental differences and their impact on teaching. This may have to do with the fact that traditional pre-service teacher education tends to treat primary school children as one group that shares similar characteristics, rather than distinguishing more clearly between younger and older primary-school EFL learners, and highlighting developmental changes (Piaget, Inhelder, 1969; Keenan, Evans, Crowley, 2016), with the implications this has for choosing age-appropriate activities. A good

knowledge of child development that includes the pre-school years enables primary school teachers to better understand their learners in Grade 1, who might be as young as five years at the beginning of a school year, might develop more slowly in certain areas (Macblain, 2020), and might therefore need a play-based approach with a more flexible language policy (Thieme, et al., 2022; Kiaer, Morgan-Brown, Choi, 2021; Alexiou, 2020; Kirsch, Seele, 2020; Mourão, Ellis, 2020). Moreover, the lack of this awareness about age-related differences also indicates that simply exploring these concepts theoretically is not sufficient for PTs to really understand them, which stresses the necessity of preparing PTs for the challenges of real classrooms by incorporating extended teaching practice, and encouraging a reflective approach (Ur, 2019).

4.2. Differences between PTs' expectations before and reflections after teaching practice

Regarding PTs' expectations and their reflections on actual classroom experience, a shift in focus can be noted. Before their teaching-based master's dissertation, PTs seemed to largely focus on themselves. In their brainstorming documents, for example, they emphasized their insecurity about lesson planning, about anticipating learner behaviour and about responding quickly to unexpected situations, which they ascribed to a perceived lack of practical experience. After their time with EFL learners at pre-school and Grade 1, however, PTs acknowledged their learners' specific needs, such as their need to be physically active, their shorter concentration span, and their increased need for visualisation. On the basis of this deeper understanding of their learners' needs, PTs also articulated strategies that they had used to adapt their teaching. This suggests that master's dissertations that incorporate extended teaching practice can foster PTs' understanding of the specific age-specific characteristics, which is a necessary pre-requisite in order to create a holistic learning environment that ensures young children's wellbeing in early EFL programmes (Halliwell, 1992; Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek, 2006; Rokita-Jaśkow, Ellis, 2019; Thieme, et al., 2022; Nikolov, Mihaljević Djigunović, 2023; Waddington, 2023). At the same time, it becomes apparent that simulation practice at university, although helpful, does have its limitations and cannot provide PTs with the opportunity to gain a better understanding of real learners, or to fully prepare for real classroom settings (Griffiths, 2023).

After their teaching experience, PTs in this study also seemed more focused on practical issues with reflective practice. In the follow-up interviews,

they explained how keeping a teaching diary and sharing thoughts with colleagues helped them with the reflection process, which practical challenges they experienced when trying to take notes in the hectic environment of pre- or primary school, and how they solved these issues. This indicates that teaching-based dissertations may also support pre-service teachers' reflective skills, which in turn can initiate a deeper understanding of learning and teaching processes in pre-school EFL, or at the beginning of primary school, and raise awareness for the complexities of teaching very young children – a pre-requisite in order to establish work relationships between EFL teachers and early years practitioners (Alexiou, 2020).

5. Conclusion

The analysis of PTs' brainstorming documents before their teaching experience, and of their reflections, as well as follow-up interviews afterwards, suggests that pre-service teacher education that is based on studying TEYL methodology and on limited simulation practice does not prepare PTs sufficiently for real-life teaching with five- to six-year-olds. Pre-service teachers' brainstorming documents demonstrate that PTs were acutely aware of their lack of practical teaching experience, and the implications this might have on their ability to plan lessons, to anticipate YLs' behaviour and to respond to unexpected situations. The reflections that PTs' shared in their master's dissertations and in follow-up interviews indicate that the task of planning and teaching a whole EFL unit of multiple sessions around one topic was an experience that provided them with the opportunity to gain deeper insights. They showed their growing ability to identify specific needs that they had observed in their EFL learners, and to adapt their lesson planning accordingly.

Findings from this study tentatively suggest that firstly, simulation practice, which PTs' referred to as helpful, needs to be more extensively used in pre-service teacher education. Secondly, PTs need to be given the opportunity to teach whole units rather than just individual lessons in real classroom settings. Thirdly, PTs also need to be introduced to analysing their own teaching at an earlier stage, so that they can improve their reflective skills over time, before they begin their teaching-based dissertation.

It is important to stress that this is a small sample of pre-service teachers in one particular teacher education context, and hence more research from other TEPs would be needed to see if similar issues are raised in different educational contexts. Furthermore, this study raises new questions, such as how pre-service teachers' reflective practices change over a longer period

of time, maybe covering pre-service and in-service work experience, and how teacher educators could guide PTs to refine as well as harness their reflection process for teaching and research purposes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexiou T. (2020), *Introducing EFL in preschools: facts and fictions*, (in:) Zoghbor W., Alexiou T. (eds.), *Advancing English language education*. Dubai: Zayed University Press, pp. 61–74.
- Blondin C., Candelier M., Edelenbos P., Johnstone R., Kubanek-German A., Taeschner T. (1998), *Foreign languages in primary and pre-school education: Contexts and outcomes. A review of recent research within the European Union*. London: CILT.
- Braun V., Clarke V. (2022), *Thematic analysis. A practical guide*. London: Sage.
- Brewster J., Ellis G., Girard D. (2002), *The primary English teacher's guide*. Harlow: Penguin.
- Burns A. (2010), *Doing action research in English language teaching: A guide for practitioners*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Cameron L. (2001), *Teaching English to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Copland F., Garton S., Barnett C. (2024), *Global practices in teaching young learners: Ten years on*. British Council. https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/2024-04/Global_practices%20Copland%20and%20Garton_v3_FINAL.pdf
- Dörnyei Z. (2007), *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Edelenbos P., Johnstone R., Kubanek A. (2006), *The main pedagogical principles underlying the teaching of languages to very young learners*. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/languages/policy/language-policy/documents/young_en.pdf
- Ellis M. (2019), *Introduction*, (in:) Rokita-Jaśkow J., Ellis M. (eds.), *Early instructed second language acquisition: Pathways to competence*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters, pp. 9–10.
- Enever J. (2016), *The advantages and disadvantages of English as a foreign language with young learners*, (in:) Bland J. (ed.), *Teaching English to young learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3-12 year olds*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, pp. 13–29.
- European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice (2023), *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe – 2023 edition*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://eurydice.eacea.ec.europa.eu/publications/key-data-teaching-languages-school-europe-2023-edition>
- Farrell T.S.C. (2018), *Reflective language teaching: Practical applications for TESOL teachers*. London and New York: Bloomsbury.

- Griffiths C. (2023), *What about the teacher?* "Language Teaching", No 56(2), pp. 210–222.
- Halliwell S. (1992), *Teaching English in the primary classroom*. Harlow: Longman.
- Keenan T., Evans S., Crowley K. (2016), *An introduction to child development*. London: Sage.
- Kiaer J., Morgan-Brown J. M., Choi M. (2021), *Young children's foreign language anxiety. A case study in South Korea*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Kirsch C., Seele C. (2020), *Translanguaging in early childhood education in Luxembourg: From practice to pedagogy*, (in:) Panagiotopoulou J. A., Rosen L., Strzykalo J. (eds.), *Inclusion, education and translanguaging*. Springer, pp. 63–81. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-28128-1>.
- Macblain S. (2020), *Child development for teachers*. London: Learning Matters.
- Ministerium für Bildung Rheinland-Pfalz (2018), *Bildungs- und Erziehungsempfehlungen für Kindertagesstätten in Rheinland-Pfalz*. Cornelsen. <https://kita.rlp.de/fileadmin/kita/Service/BEE>
- Mishler E.G. (1986), *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mourão S. (2014), *Taking play seriously in the pre-primary English classroom*. "ELT Journal", No 68(3), pp. 254–264. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccu018>
- Mourão S., Ellis G. (2020), *Teaching English to pre-primary children*. Stuttgart: Delta Publishing.
- Nikolov M., Mihaljević Djigunović J. (2023), *Studies on pre-primary learners of foreign languages, their teachers, and parents: A critical overview of publications between 2000 and 2022*. "Language Teaching", 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444823000095>
- Pérez B.C., Robles S.C., Soto A.A. (2022), *Bridging the gap between foreign language and early childhood teacher education: A quantitative and qualitative analysis of teacher knowledge base*. "Monograph", No V, pp. 43–63.
- Piaget J. (1959), *The language and thought of the child*. 3rd revised ed. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Piaget J., Inhelder B. (1969), *The psychology of the child*, New York: Basic Books.
- Pinter A. (2017), *Teaching young language learners*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Read C. (2016), *Foreword*, (in:) Bland J. (ed.), *Teaching English to young learners: Critical issues in language teaching with 3-12 year olds*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, pp. xi–xiii.
- Rokita-Jaśkow J., Ellis M. (eds.) (2019), *Early instructed second language acquisition: Pathways to competence*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Shin J.K., Savić V., Machida T. (2021), *The six principles for elementary teaching of language learners: Young learners in a multilingual world*. Alexandria, VA: Tesolpress.
- Thieme A.M.M., Hanekamp K., Andringa S. Verhagen J., Kuiken F. (2022), *The effects of foreign language programmes in early childhood education and care: a systematic review*. "Language, Culture and Curriculum", No 35(3), pp. 334–351.

- Ur P. (2019), *Theory and practice in language teacher education*. "Language Teaching", 52(4), pp. 450–459. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444819000090>
- Vygotsky L. (1978), *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Waddington J. (2023), *Early foreign language education: play as a site for child agency*. "Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development", pp. 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2023.2290095>
- Walsh S., Mann S. (2015), *Doing reflective practice: a data-led way forward*. "ELT Journal", No 69(4), pp. 351–362.

Received: 23.08.2024

Revised: 13.12.2024

Appendix

Prompts for brainstorming (my translation)

1. Which valuable insights do you hope to gain for your future work as primary-school teacher?
2. Name aspects of teaching that your degree programme at university prepared you for and aspects you feel ill prepared for.
3. Talk about your thoughts about keeping a teaching diary.
4. Which challenges do you expect with respect to teaching and which with respect to writing-up your master dissertation?
5. Which COVID-related problems or opportunities do you expect in school?