Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Philosophy & Humanistic Sciences
ISSN: 2284-5976 | e-ISSN: 2501-0409
Covered in: ERIH+; CEEOL; Index Copernicus; CrossRef; CrossCheck; J-Gate; Google Scholar; Ideas RePeC; Econpapers; Socionet; KVK; WorldCat, EBSCO.

2021, Volume 9, Issue 1, pages: 45-55| https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs/9.1/56

The Controversial Issues Experienced by the English Language Teachers in Primary Schools Worldwide Echoing into the Romanian Language Education Context

Iuliana LUNGU[1]

[1] Lecturer, PhD, "Ovidius" University of Constanta, Romania.
iulianalungu@yahoo.com

Abstract: The present article aims to outline the framework for this debated topical issue, focusing its scientific efforts on the critical and relevant aspects of the teaching problems faced by the English language teachers worldwide echoing locally, in the Romanian primary schools. The choice of the field of analysis was not at all accidental, coming mainly from a growing to find answers to a series of personal dilemmas, such as educational field, mainly teaching foreign languages in primary education, especially in the current conditions, when the universe of language teaching is constantly changing. The changes are caused by factors such as the complex policies in the field of education (it is often assumed that it is better to start learning foreign languages early), the political and labor market changes, where it is essential to have a competitive English-speaking workforce. Finally, individual reasons resulting from parents' desire their children to develop English language skills from an early age.
Hence, there are several serious challenges that need to be considered when it comes to teaching English to young primary school students. The present research is an investigative approach that is based on a larger study exploring the practices of teaching English to young school children worldwide, a study conducted by the British Council in 2013 and published a year later, and it also refers to the policy and practice of teaching English in primary schools in Romania. The purpose of this article is to identify the key challenges faced by English teachers in primary school both globally, in several countries involved in the study, and locally, respectively in Romania.

Keywords: *educational policy, teaching English, primary education, global perspective.*

How to cite: Lungu, I. (2021). The Controversial Issues Experienced by the English Language Teachers in Primary Schools Worldwide Echoing into the Romanian Language Education Context. *Logos Universality Mentality Education Novelty: Philosophy & Humanistic Sciences, 9*(1), 45-55. https://doi.org/10.18662/lumenphs/9.1/56

1. Introduction

The literature on teaching English to young students has drawn a general picture of the field and emphasized the emergence of a new educational model, adapted to the needs of today's kaleidoscopic society, which places the knowledge of foreign languages at the center of its training network. As a result, recent theories, in line with the new dimensions of the teaching-learning-assessment triad, actually mark the emergence of an innovative didactic vision, which emphasizes and values language as a communication tool. Most specialized studies published in recent years analyze this communication model, putting into practice new lines of reflection and action for the language teacher, currently facing a much broader issue, specific to modern functional teaching. In this context, early initiation into the study of a foreign language becomes one of the recurring themes in the field. However, a number of challenges have been identified, such as the lack of training for a competent language teacher for primary cycle of education despite the fact that English is a compulsory subject in primary school. In some countries, including Romania, there is a serious shortage of English language teachers trained for primary education and this situation is particular for rural areas.

One of the most complex educational decisions that affects the classes of young school-age students, and not only, concerns the elaboration of a consensual strategic plan at national level, supported by political will, regarding the language education of the society, which should include not only the early initiation in the study of foreign languages, but also the concept of "lifelong learning".

The spread of English worldwide has strengthened the belief that students should acquire communication skills rather than knowledge of English, starting at an early age (Nunan, 2003). The reasons are varied, but of economic essence (Enever & Moon, 2009). Consequently, the more recent curriculum of young pupils emphasized communication skills. Teachers in countries such as East Asia, this has led to the introduction the communication model mentioned earlier in the form of communicative language teaching (CLT), CLIL technique, content-based learning of a foreign language, task-based learning and teaching (TBLT), these methods demonstrating a remarkable scientific fervour through the multitude of initiatives and reconfigurations (Hu, 2002; Mitchell & Lee, 2003; Prapaisit de Segovia & Hardison, 2008; Tinker Sachs, 2009). However, teachers in these countries find the introduction of these new approaches quite challenging.

As Enever and Moon (2009) points out, CLT is a is an approach that aims to achieve communicative rather than linguistic competence through learner interaction. In Western European countries this method is used to teach young adults in small classrooms. Therefore, this method may not be appropriate in teaching large groups of children in primary classrooms where resources can be limited. In this sense we consider it necessary to design a new curriculum based on the development of specific professional skills, practical/applied courses and the authentic teaching experiences, adequate to the needs of the language teachers for primary education.

In close connection with the policies regarding the methodology of teaching English to primary schoolchildren, the problem of teaching resources is obviously relevant. In some countries, such as South Korea (Butler, 2004), teachers of English use certain recommended textbooks. In other countries, teachers use textbooks approved by government, for example, in Singapore (Mee, 2003) and China (Hu, 2005). If we consider the global need for early English language learning, creating authentic teaching materials and implementing new approaches, adapted to the age range of learners should become more and more extensive (İnal, 2009; Nunan, 2003).

Another major issue for English language teachers is the level of competence they have. They seem not to have specific professional standards and the lack of initial and continuous training programs for foreign language teachers in primary education has led to the lack of confidence in their ability, has caused anxiety and called into question their skills, with special reference to speaking ones (Kuchah, 2009).

Furthermore, the large size of classrooms is a real challenge in the view of some authors (Shamin, 2012; Wedgwood, 2007), leading teachers to believe that it is almost impossible to employ student-centered methods of teaching (Hoque, 2009; Li, 1998). A related issue is the issue of control and discipline (Butler, 2005; Carless, 2004; Littlewood, 2007).

2. Current teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) situation in Romania in terms of primary education

The article is based on a large investigation performed by the British Council in 2013 and published a year later. The initial objective of the study had in view identifying the critical points that could be improved in the training process of modern language teachers in primary and pre-school education, given primarily the existing dysfunction at that moment. As they outlined, during the preparatory grade and grades 1 and 2, the foreign language is an elective subject, part of the school-based curriculum, comprised by the Curricular Area Language and Communication,

competence-based subject curriculum centrally developed by the Romanian Education Ministry (MECTS), common for all the foreign languages to be taken at this level. According to the curriculum at least one hour per week should be devoted to learning a foreign language. Starting with Grades 3 and 4, the foreign language becomes s compulsory subject, part of the core curriculum, comprised by the Curricular Area Language and Communication, objective-based subject curriculum with a number of 2-3 hours per week.

Now let us examine some of the major challenges the Romanian teachers of English face in primary education:

- the paradox of professionalization for primary education in terms of language education; in other words, foreign languages, in this case English, are taught either by specialist teachers without pedagogical and methodical training for these young ages, or by teachers specialized in preschool education / primary, but lacking a solid baggage of language knowledge and skills;
- Curriculum models should be appropriate in terms of age, psychology and early childhood pedagogy;
- too much concentration of training courses on issues related to the teaching of modern languages in middle school and high school, and less in primary school;
- extremely low number of training sessions in the target language country, although increasing exchanges of experience and the international mobility of language teachers are one of the priorities of European language policies;
- the mostly theoretical orientation of the training courses within the psycho-pedagogical training module, to the detriment of the real problems and challenges in the classroom practice.

3. The operational and practical dimensions of the study

The research carried out consists of two sections. The first section is a classic question in which teachers were asked to order elements that "would best improve learning and teaching" in their context. This question aimed to discover areas that teachers might consider troublesome at the local level. The responses referred at: better access to resources such as books and materials; fewer tests and exams; better access to new technologies, for example digital devices; training in current language teaching methodologies, smaller classes; improving the methodology of teaching English to younger pupils of primary school age; more classes of

English in the Curriculum, all these elements being already signaled by the specialized literature.

The second section of the survey data is an open-ended question that was asked of teachers, "What aspects of your work do you find most challenging?", which gathered a large number of answers containing keywords, such as "discipline", "motivation" and "grammar" in a repetitive way, a corpus instrument was considered the most suitable for analysis.

The next step was the selection of a representative sample of teachers from five different countries: Colombia, Italy, South Korea, Tanzania and the United Arab Emirates, who were interviewed about the current issues in teaching English they deal with. The findings from these qualitative data were then combined with the survey responses that were filtered for each country. The countries were selected to include important parts of the world and to highlight different perspectives around the world.

4. Results

The first research question in the survey focused on teachers' awareness of the challenges they face in teaching English to young school-age students. The responses related to the challenges faced by English language teachers for young pupils are presented in the results of the ranking question, which asked teachers to classify those aspects that they consider important to improve the specific methodology in classrooms. These findings are illustrated as below (Figure 1).

It can be seen from this chart (the columns on the left are considered to be the most important while the ones on the right the least important) that fewer tests and exams are taken into account as the least important factor in improving learning and teaching to a large extent. Learning English at an earlier age is regarded as the second less important category, while better access to teaching resources and an improved level of teachers' English attract a similar number of responses, but are still believed to be less important than other factors.

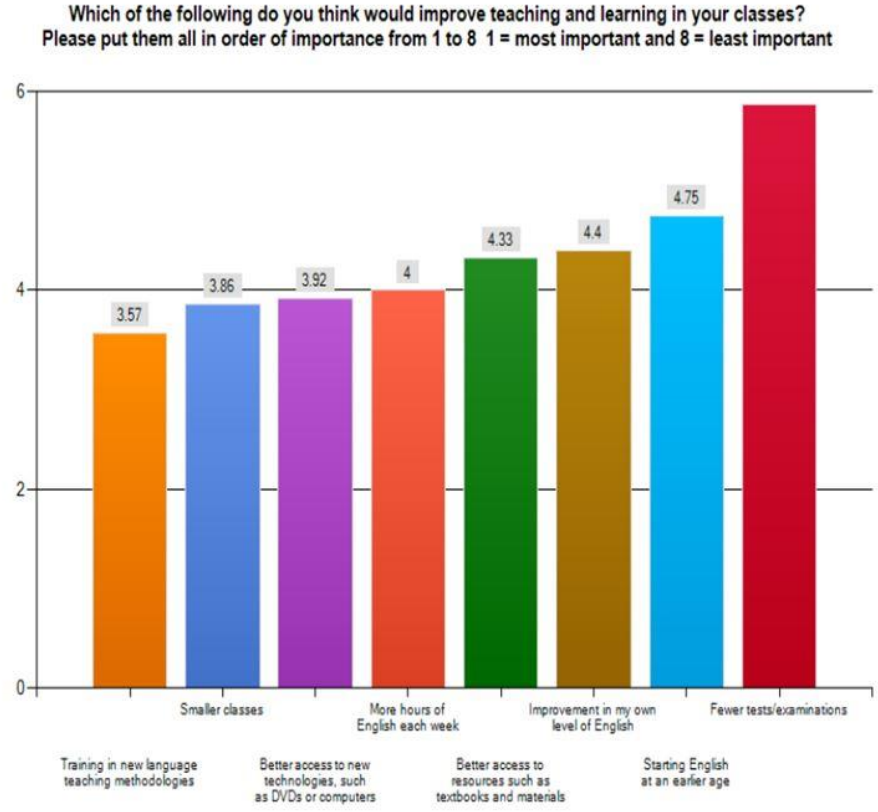


Figure 1.

More training in language teaching methodologies is ranked as the most important globally, with a fairly large margin. Smaller classes, better access to new technologies and more English lessons had a similar number of responses and were also considered important by teachers. These results will be discussed in more detail below.

More relevant information on teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face was gathered from the open-ended question: "What aspects of your profession do you find most challenging?" The following descriptive table was generated from the corpus analysis:

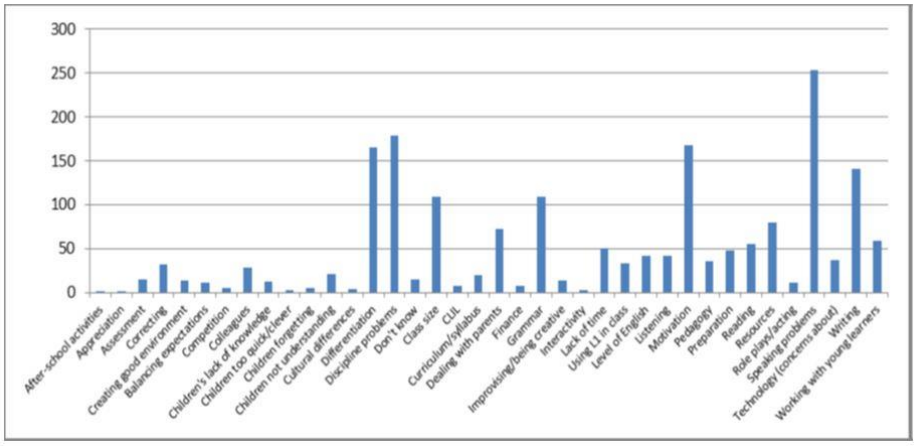


Figure 2.

As it can be seen, the category that gave the most comments was "speech problems" with 254 comments. The part that included the teaching of speech and pronunciation in particular was given by 143 responses. This was followed by discipline issues (179), which included discipline problems in the classroom (67), behavior aspects (53) and classroom management issues (47). Then came elements related to motivation (168) and the following, differentiation (156) in which different levels or skills were grouped (65); weak students (33) or students with some learning difficulties (29); meeting students' special needs. As for writing, it was ranked fifth with 141 responses accompanied by comments divided between teaching writing and spelling. Grammar and class size elements were found in 109 comments.

5. Pedagogical implications for teachers

The study presented in this article validates a significant understanding of the problems faced by English language teachers in two ways. Firstly, it systematically records and compares the challenges previously identified in a number of global contexts. Secondly, it identifies a number of areas that have not been previously signaled in the literature.

What is relevant for the findings of the study is the fact that most teachers are less concerned with tests and examinations than the literature would suggest and that there is a particular concern regarding the methodology of language teaching, teaching speaking in particular. These findings may reflect possible explanations for prevalent government policies that have focused on communicative approaches as a popular way of dealing with the perceived need for an English-speaking workforce in the global

economy. This is a relevant perspective, despite what recent literature outlines that learning English may not be in everyone's interest.

The communicative approach to learning and teaching English can also represent a trend for change in the language culture from language learning as a formal subject to learning it as a practical skill, required by the present skill-oriented syllabus with a special emphasis on speaking. As a result, the data collected identifies a shift in teachers' worries from transferring exams to developing students' language skills in certain areas of language learning.

The research data also drew attention to another major teachers' concern that is the fact that lessons should be conducted only in English, a principle of the communicative method observed in the most lessons. However, the literature (Creese & Blackledge, 2010) is beginning to question the hegemony of English in the classroom. It seems that there is no harm in using translation as a teaching strategy for learning English in an EFL context as long as it is not overused in class.. Students in early stages of learning the language are certainly exposed to some explanation in their mother tongue especially when explaining difficult grammar rules that the students cannot grasp in English. Thus bilingual method or approach to teaching English has always been welcomed only when a need arises.

In upper levels, however, students are expected to understand explanations in English. They should not be encouraged to rely on translation as this will eventually become a habit and they will have less interest in learning the language in its natural native context.

Another trend is worth being mentioned here, namely, the introduction of teachers in practical strategies for teaching productive skills, speaking and writing, rather than the introduction of general concepts of communicative language teaching. For this reason, education programs should include basic skills in classroom management in designing and monitoring pair and group activities, or different types of speaking and writing activities that are most helpful with certain age groups or proficiency levels of language (Butler, 2005; Littlewood, 2007). Teacher training should also focus on strategies for maintaining discipline, especially in large classrooms and developing children' motivation. Discipline problems such as noise and misbehavior, which can result from an interactive classroom, especially in large classrooms, could be relevant for our discussion. Despite classroom observations providing examples of good practice, the survey responses show that teachers are still struggling with these areas globally.

Learning more about teaching writing skills should take into account the type of writing that children need to do, as they develop motor and

cognitive skills. Also teaching creative writing in many cases may not be justifiable choice.

This research refers to political trends requiring teaching of the English language, often without taking into consideration the adequate resources or the number of learners as well as the objectives of the program (Enever, 2011).

Another difficult area the training of English language teachers is related to working with students with mixed abilities or with students with learning disorders and with those from problematic backgrounds. Moreover, teachers should approach the socio-cultural aspects of language learning, as well as appropriate language teaching strategies for students with different needs.

6. Conclusions

This article identified and formulated a number of critical points in the methodology of teaching English to young schoolchildren. It has been pointed out that the absence of a professional qualification, regulated by law, to target the activity of foreign language teachers in primary education is a real challenge besides the lack of teaching resources. Teachers from many parts of the world identify teaching skills as a special challenge that training courses should definitely approach. Approaching divergence is also a problem that could be solved by a series of answers ranging from training courses to use of authentic materials. Other challenges are more specific and include classroom size, classroom management, teachers' own language skills and time pressures. Kumaravadivelu (2001) believes that teachers should "develop the knowledge and skills, attitude and autonomy needed to build their own context-sensitive pedagogical knowledge" (p. 541) and this should certainly be the goal of education to all teachers.

Locally speaking, there are specific challenges such as the paradox of professionalization for primary education from the perspective of language education, in the sense that foreign languages are taught either by specialized teachers, but without psycho-pedagogical and methodical training for the target age groups, or by teachers specializing in pre-secondary education, but without a solid baggage of language knowledge and skills. Also, the extremely low number of training courses in the target language country, although the intensification of exchanges of experience and the international mobility of foreign language teachers is one of the priorities of European language policies. These are part of the proposals formulated in the present study which represent a research track worth exploring in the coming years, including through possible legislative transformations, a starting point for

Romania's new language policy, as an integral part of the great European adventures.

References

Butler, Y. G. (2004). What level of English proficiency do elementary school teachers need to attain to teach EFL? Case studies from Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. *TESOL Quarterly, 38*(2), 245-278. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588380

Butler, Y. G. (2005). Comparative perspectives towards communicative activities among elementary school teachers in South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. *Language Teaching Research*, *9*(4), 423-446. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1362168805lr176oa

Carless, D. (2004). Issues in Teachers' Reinterpretation of a Task-Based Innovation in Primary Schools. *TESOL Quarterly*, *38*(4), 639-662. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588283

Creese, A., & Blackledge, A. (2010). Translanguaging in the bilingual classroom: A pedagogy for learning and teaching?. *The Modern Language Journal*, *94*(1), 103-115. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00986.x

Enever, J. (Ed.). (2011). *ELLiE. Early language learning in Europe.* British Council.

Enever, J., & Moon, J. (2009). New global contexts for teaching primary ELT: Change and challenge. In J. Enever, J. Moon & U. Raman (Eds.), *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives* (pp. 5-21). Garnet Education.

Hoque, S. (2009). Teaching English in primary schools in Bangladesh : Competencies and achievements. In J. Enever, J. Moon & U. Raman (Eds), *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives* (pp. 61-69). Garnet Education.

Hu, G. (2002). Potential Cultural Resistance to Pedagogical Imports: The Case of Communicative Language Teaching in China. *Language, Culture and Curriculum Journal*, *15*(2), 93-105. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908310208666636

Hu, G. (2005). Contextual Influences on Instructional Practices: A Chinese Case for an Ecological Approach to ELT. *TESOL Quartely*, *39*(4), 635-660. https://doi.org/10.2307/3588525

İnal, D. (2009). The early bird catches the worm: The Turkish case. In J. Enever, J. Moon & U. Raman (Eds.), *Young Learner English Language Policy and Implementation: International Perspectives* (pp. 71-78). Garnet Education.

Kuchah, K. (2009). Early bilingualism in Cameroon: Where politics and education meet. In J. Enever, J. Moon & U. Raman (Eds), *Young learner English language policy and implementation: International perspectives* (pp. 87-94). Garnet Education.

Kumaravadivelu, B. (2001). Toward a post-method pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, *35*(4), 537-560. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588427

Li, D. (1998). "It's always more difficult than you plan and imagine": Teachers' perceived difficulties in introducing the communicative approach in South Korea. *TESOL Quarterly*, *32*(4), 677-703. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588000

Littlewood, W. (2007). Communicative and task-based language teaching in East Asian classrooms. *Language Teaching*, *40*(03), 243. http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004363

Mee, C. Y. (2003). English language teaching in Singapore today. In W. K. Ho & R. Y. L. Wong (Eds), *English language teaching in East Asia today: Changing policies and practices* (pp. 351-374). Eastern Universities Press.

Mitchell, R., & Lee, J. H.-W. (2003). Sameness and difference inclassroom learning cultures: Interpretations of communicative pedagogy in the UK and Korea. *Language Teaching Research*, *7*(1), 35-63. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1362168803lr114oa

Nunan, D. (2003). The impact of English as a global language on educational policies and practices in the Asia-Pacific region. *TESOLQuarterly*, *37*(4), 589-613. http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/3588214

Prapaisit de Segovia, L., & Hardison, D. M. (2008). Implementing education reform: EFL teachers' perspectives. *ELT Journal, 63*(2), 154-162. http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccn024

Shamim, F. (2012). Teaching large classes. In A. Burns & J. C. Richards(Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to pedagogy and practice in second language teaching* (pp. 95-102). CUP.

Tinker Sachs, G. (2009). Taking risks in task-based teaching and learning [Abstract]. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, *19*, 91-112. http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/ajelt/vol19/abstract/a04.pdf

Wedgwood, R. (2007). Education and poverty reduction in Tanzania. *International Journal of Educational Development*, *27*(4), 383-396. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2006.10.005