Primary EFL teachers as researchers - Benefits and challenges

Nora Benitt

The education and professional development of foreign language teachers is a challenging endeavour – for the (student) teachers themselves, as well as for the teacher educators involved. In particular, the meaningful integration of theory and practice is central to the ongoing discussion as to how to conceptualise and implement foreign language teacher education. One approach to bridge theory and practice in teacher education is classroom action research, i.e. the systematic and critical exploration of one’s own teaching.

In the form of a qualitative-interpretative study, I investigated a cohort of twelve (student) teachers enrolled in the M.A. programme ‘E-LINGO – Teaching English to Young Learners’. The aim was to explore if, how and under what circumstances classroom action research, a core component of the programme, can foster learning and professional development. The findings strongly suggest that action research has a positive impact on teacher learning: On an affective level, it can lead to increased professional confidence and a deeper understanding of the own role. On an interpersonal level, action research can enhance cooperative development through successful teamwork, commitment to the shared task and adequate support structures. On a cognitive level, it may lead to increased theoretical and methodological knowledge.

However, cooperatively preparing, implementing and evaluating classroom action research projects also challenged the (student) teachers in different ways. They all had different educational and cultural backgrounds and various levels of professional experience in the field of language teaching. Through cooperative action research they were confronted with problems concerning time and task management and, at the same time, were incited to scrutinise and reconstruct their roles as teachers.
Theory and practice in primary English teacher education.
A review of empirical research until 2015

Henriette Dausend

This talk reviews empirical research on primary English teacher education in Germany. It describes the success of and the demands on primary school English teacher education within the last decades. As the body of research is quite limited, all findings are completed by studies from fields such as primary teacher education and English teacher education in general. Broadening the core focus allows to draw more satisfying conclusions. These conclusions are principles for good English primary teacher education on the one hand and open research questions on the other hand.

Being divided in three main parts, this talk gives insights into the current state of research. Firstly, I present several studies on primary English teacher education and sum up their main findings. Secondly, this data basis is used to derive principles for good primary English teacher education. These principles are discussed and examples of suitable teaching scenarios are given which are said to develop competencies and professional habitus in future primary English school teachers. Thirdly, I use the body of research to derive still more relevant research questions linked to primary English teacher education in Germany. These hints help to guide further research in the direction necessary for providing good primary English teacher education in Germany.
Teacher language in German EFL-PL classes - an interview study

Ann-Cathrin Deters

In the year 2005, English was first introduced as a compulsory subject in grades three and four at primary level in every German federal state. Due to the lack of qualified primary teachers who studied English as one of their majors at university, many “semi-skilled” teachers, i.e. those who participated in short-term further training measures, were appointed to teach English in German primary schools. Today, a decade after the nationwide introduction of English language teaching at primary level (EFL-PL), parents, teachers and politicians alike are questioning the added value of early language learning. Although it is imperative for the success of EFL-PL that teachers set a good example and serve as a language model for the young learners, the question to what degree (or if at all) teachers’ qualifications can meet the actual (linguistic) demands of early foreign language classes has been left out of the debate to this day.

The research project at hand aims to clarify in what ways teachers’ foreign language proficiency influences their English teaching practice. The main focus of the study is the classroom discourse instigated by the teacher in English and how that can bring about target language production in the students.

In view of the fact that large numbers of primary school teachers are made to teach English without ever getting adequate training, research in this area is essential. It is hoped that the expected insights this study provides could result in an adjustment of linguistic as well as didactic-methodological training measures for primary teachers with regard to the actual demands in an EFL-PL classroom. In the long run, schools will benefit from these measures because of their potential to improve the quality of teaching as well as students’ skills in the target language.
The term 21st century skills refers to a wide-ranging set of knowledge, skills, work habits, and character traits that are believed to be vital for success in today’s world. In line with this, national curricula for teaching and learning languages in Europe foster the development of applied skills, cross-curricular skills, transferable skills, noncognitive skills, and soft skills next to content specific knowledge. However standards for university teacher training in Germany still stress the development of subject-specific knowledge, neglecting the fact that not only pupils but also their teachers must develop the aforementioned skills.

The GU Students´ Online Handbook is a product of a university class that focuses on the most important aspects of learning and teaching foreign languages in primary and secondary school classrooms, such as competence development, curricular guidelines, learner characteristics and language learning, language learning environments etc. The first aim of the seminar is to revise and discuss major topics and recent research outcomes in the field of TEFL pedagogy. For this students read and discuss relevant texts and listen to presentations of experts in the first part of the seminar. In a second phase students summarize and discuss their gained knowledge in short and vivid infomercials/video podcasts which are recorded in the Goethe University TV studio. Prior to the recordings all participants participate in a 4 hour workshop on camera-training. All videos are supplemented by a short reading list and a bibliography. Pre-while-and post reflection tasks are added to each film sequence. The video units are produced by 2-4 student-experts in cooperation with the lecturer of the seminar and a media specialist. Assessment instruments for the evaluation of the videos are being developed by the students accordingly. The material is uploaded to the GU Student´s Online Handbook for TEFL Pedagogy – a website to be used by university students for individual exam preparation and/or as an initiator for research. In-service teachers may also use this platform for autonomous learning about current aspects of language learning and teaching. The videos give evidence of students´ language proficiency, their presentation skills and their content knowledge. The class and the new form of assessment have been evaluated through questionnaires by 120 students participating in the seminars. Questions focused on students´ understanding of professional teaching competencies and their development of 21st Century Teaching Skills aside from content knowledge, referring to “learning and innovation skills”, “digital literacy skills” and “career and life skills” (Trilling 2009) by producing those video podcasts.
Bibliography

A passion for teaching, or the brightest and the best?

Notions of quality in primary EFL teacher education

Janet Enever

Since publication of the first PISA results in 2001, where Finland topped the global hit parade of education success (or rather, top in those strands of education that best lend themselves to measurement), the world has flocked to Finland in the hope of learning how to replicate their success – often in very different educational and cultural contexts. What can we learn from a system that selects those with a passion for teaching, in preference to the highest scoring applicants, then puts them through their paces in a five year, research-focused course as a preparation for a career as generalist primary teachers (including expertise in teaching English, Finnish, Swedish and possibly Sami)?

This paper adopts a historical view in reviewing patterns of pre- and in-service provision for teacher education across Europe, considering the merits of both concurrent and consecutive teacher education as frameworks for achieving quality in primary EFL provision. Recently published data, together with new data from a number of contexts is interrogated to identify contemporary practices and future trends in primary EFL teacher education in Europe.

The analysis reveals the need for further research to shed light on the range of delivery models currently existing in the field of primary ELT and clarify the nature of pre-service course content necessary to fully equip graduates with the expertise to understand the demands of particular models and to ensure appropriate learner outcomes.
Beginning reading and writing in primary EFL classes –
Experiences from an in-service training in Germany

Alicia Jöckel

At the beginning of teaching English as a Foreign Language in German primary schools, the focus has long been on developing oral skills. Reading and writing in the foreign language was assumed to interfere with the development of German reading and writing and has, thus, been mainly avoided. Only until recent empirical research could confirm the positive effects of developing first and foreign language written skills in parallel have teachers and educators started to allow reading and writing to be included in primary EFL teaching and learning (Duscha 2007, Rymarczyk 2008, Frisch 2013). Whereas other European countries have not paid such extraordinary attention to this issue and included balanced skills training to primary EFL learners from the beginning, German researchers and teachers have just recently started to develop ideas of how to teach written EFL skills (Drew 2009, Ibarrola 2010, Böttger 2013, Fröhlich 2013). This presentation focuses on issues of teaching written skills to primary EFL learners based on empirical data from an in-service training with German primary EFL teachers. Teachers’ prior teaching experiences as well as their current teaching habits were collected with the help of questionnaires and interviews which allowed reconstructing individual processes of professional development in this respect. During this training which accompanied six weeks of their regular teaching, teachers got input on linguistic background of the English writing system as well as methodological suggestions. Materials and methods for this training were adapted to the needs of the German EFL context from teaching reading and writing with the help of phonics in the United Kingdom. In reverse, the teachers themselves gave feedback on the teaching ideas presented in the training sessions based on both their general teaching expertise and their first experiences with these materials and methods in class. Thus, teachers’ perspectives on their first experiences and the collaborative professional development of researchers and teachers in this process will be the centre of interest in this presentation.
References


Teacher education and professional competence of EFL teachers: Evidence from the PKE project

Johannes König, Sandra Lammerding, Günter Nold, Andreas Rohde, Sarah Strauß, Sarantis Tachtsoglou

For the past decades, the interest in doing research on the measurement of cognitive elements of teacher competence has been growing. One major reason for this is the understanding that knowledge is required for effective teaching. The growing body of research in the field of teacher knowledge and empirical testing has a special focus on subject-related issues, mostly exemplified by mathematics teachers. However, similar research related to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) virtually does not exist.

To close this research gap, in 2014 we started the research project “Professional competence of EFL teachers: Foreign Language Pedagogical Content Knowledge of Pre-Service Teachers – Concept, Measurement, and Validation” (“Professionelle Kompetenz von Englischlehrkräften (PKE): Fachdidaktisches Wissen angehender Englischlehrkräfte – Konzeption, Messung, Validierung”; funded by the German Research Foundation, DFG, KO3947/6-1).

The objectives of the PKE-project are related to a thorough investigation of future EFL teachers’ opportunities to learn during initial teacher education and its relationship to facets of their professional competence. Professional competence is differentiated into cognitive and affective-motivational elements such as test scores of their content knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, and measures of their beliefs about teaching and learning EFL, and motivation to teach EFL. Contrasted groups of future EFL teachers from both phases of initial teacher education, first phase at universities, second phase at “seminars” are recruited to examine how differential opportunities to learn relate to their competence.

In our article we describe the current state of research on teacher professional competence in general and with regards to EFL teachers in Germany, how initial teacher education is related to the development of EFL teachers’ competence. The PKE project design and its research model are presented, its measurement instruments and first findings outlined. Implications for the discourse on quality assurance and standard setting in EFL teacher training will be discussed.
Early foreign language learning has become a normality in primary schools and a number of kindergartens. Considering the large body of research, the number of programme types, the vast teaching experience and materials production, the main focus of the talk will be on an analysis of developments during the past 10 years. The criteria will be taken from the EU meta-study (Edelenbos, Johnstone, Kubanek 2006) and from issues mentioned in the report about the Umea Conference 2014 organized by J. Enever. The talk will also present some ideas about a re-definition of EFLL: Very often, the playful dimension has dominated perception but as the integration of EFLL into curricula was a direct consequence of the fall of the Iron Curtain we can say that EFLL is a highly political subject. At a moment when Europe is redefining her position towards immigration and otherness and in view of climate change it appears that there needs to be a new look at the tasks and possibilities of EFLL.
Links between teacher development and working with children as co-researchers

Annamaria Pinter and Rama Mathew

This talk is focused on an ongoing research project (ELTRP British Council 2014) which involves a group of Indian primary English language teachers and their learners (all over India) engaged as co-investigators of their own classrooms. This group of volunteer teachers view their experience as a special action research project. They keep diaries about their experiences, they sometimes record their classrooms and most importantly, they have regular conversations with the children about their roles as ‘co-researchers’. They also keep record of the children’s initiatives, the products that emerge from the classroom investigations and reflect together with their learners about the whole process. Within the project we have cycles of workshops for the teachers to come together and reflect on their experiences and share successes and challenges in a friendly environment. Whilst one aim is to understand more about the children from their own perspectives as English learners and investigators of English classrooms, in this talk we focus on the benefits of this project on the primary English language teachers’ professional development. Our data (diaries and interviews as well as joint presentations at conferences) so far indicate that all teachers develop as professionals and as individuals. For examples, teachers report that they have more motivation to listen to their learners than before, they have more interest in their own teaching and more willingness to share their experiences with colleagues. Other benefits include development in language proficiency, heightened social awareness and an interest to explore more about links between research and practice. The talk will conclude with our reflections about what features/characteristics of this project make it possible for teachers to engage in enjoyable professional development experiences. This will have important implications for other contexts.
Since German primary school children have been given the opportunity to study foreign languages, doubts about the effectiveness of early foreign language teaching have often been expressed in the media, i.e., in newspaper and journal articles, radio interviews etc. Apparently, the rather playful language as subject approach followed by most German primary schools has not produced the positive results many people had expected because of the assumption expressed by many researchers that an early starting age can almost automatically lead to successful foreign language learning.

In order to understand why the approach to early foreign language teaching followed by most German primary schools since the end of the 1990s has not been able to live up to the high expectations many people appear to have had in the beginning, it is important to realize that age is not the only factor that is crucial for success in second/foreign language learning and that the age variable is often confounded with many other variables such as quantity and quality of foreign language input or amount of foreign language use, which also have an influence on a learner’s linguistic development. This paper will critically assess the relative importance of different factors for success in second/foreign language learning by reviewing the results of previous research and it will discuss the implications of this research for early foreign language teaching. In this context, particular emphasis will also be put on the question which skills teachers need to develop and which learning environments teachers have to create in order to effectively support their students’ progress in learning a foreign language.
The introduction of EFL in primary education: Challenges for EFL teachers in Germany

Raphaela Porsch & Eva Wilden

In the school year 2003/04 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was introduced as a compulsory primary school subject in all federal states of Germany. This change in the educational system resulted in a continuous debate about “continuity or discontinuity” (Griebel and Niesel, 2013) in matters of EFL education relevant to EFL teachers in German primary and secondary schools alike. Although a novelty in standard German primary education the compulsory introduction of EFL as a primary school subject was hardly prepared or accompanied by evidence-based evaluations. In contrast to other educational initiatives little research has been conducted since to test its effectiveness and uncover possible challenges for both primary and secondary EFL teachers regarding the matter of transition. From the perspective of implementation research the introduction of EFL in primary education can be regarded as an innovation. Following this we will analyze the implementation process on the basis of Jägers framework (2004) and his ‘wave model’ differentiating between three dimensions – content, person, and structure. We will especially focus on the current state of research about EFL teachers’ perspectives regarding this innovation (e.g., Kahl & Knebler, 1996; Böttger, 2009; Kolb, 2009, 2011) as they ought to be considered a significant factor in its implementation. Teachers professional knowledge, their beliefs, values and motivational orientations (Baumert & Kunter, 2013) are pivotal in making this innovation a success – or the opposite. Based on these findings we will identify potential reasons for the views of teachers investigated in prior studies and suggest ideas for further research.


Research on teacher knowledge and, more recently, teacher identity has been complemented by a growing interest in teachers’ beliefs (cf. Skott 2015: 26; Borg 2003). The fundamental hypothesis within this perspective holds that beliefs impact on behaviour, i.e. on classroom practice (cf. Buehl & Beck 2015). Given the renewed support for the idea that learners’ success depends noticeably on teachers’ classroom practices, it seems only logical to argue that teacher education can help improve students’ learning outcomes, if it impacts on what teachers actually do. This, in turn, will be more likely, if it impacts on what they believe (cf. Borg 2011).

While a considerable body of research focuses on teacher learning in the pre-service phase of teacher education (e.g. Blömeke et al. 2011; Johnson 1992), there is an apparent lack of studies investigating teachers’ professional development during in-service training. The study presented here responds to this need and aims at the beliefs EFL teachers hold and continue to develop during their in-service training: What do beginning language teachers believe constitutes effective instruction? What makes them revise or discard beliefs, as they develop a closer understanding of their own classroom practice?

In BELT, eight informants were sampled from two groups of in-service trainees, working in Dortmund and Hamm (Germany) towards a teaching degree in TEFL at primary and secondary level respectively. Informants have been taking part in a series of cognitive and episodic interviews during their 18-month training, which will end in October 2015. As a work-in-progress report, this presentation will

- discuss research questions and central theoretical propositions
- outline the research design
- describe data elicitation procedures and
- illustrate preliminary findings.


Policy and Practice in Early Language Learning Teacher Education

Shelagh Rixon

This paper will be based on the worldwide survey undertaken for the British Council, published in 2013, on policy and practice in primary school English as a Foreign Language Teaching but with some updates and collection of fresh, more detailed, data on the subject of Teacher Education.

Particular attention will be paid to policy and practice concerning the content of Teacher Education programmes in this field at both pre-service and in-service levels. The British Council Survey showed that provision of training for primary school English Language Teaching varies very widely in different regions of the world, from dedicated pre-service programmes to perfunctory ‘conversion’ courses for existing teachers of other subjects. Some surprising gaps in subject-matter were found. A survey of the literature undertaken for another research project by the present speaker in 2011 established that, at that point, in the field of English Language at least, very little training designed to ‘convert’ existing primary school or secondary school teachers into specialist teachers of English at primary level could be identified world-wide that went beyond language improvement for the teachers themselves and/or some basic notions of language teaching methodology. In addition, a very great variety of previous or recent qualifications was acceptable in different contexts and would grant exemption from training for the role of primary English Language teacher. This included at one extreme the possession of a first degree in English Literature with no additional training. The paper will be an attempt to see what developments may have taken place over the past 5 years.

An attempt will be made to include work in Teacher Education for the teaching of other languages at primary school level, including that taking place in the UK for languages such as French and Spanish.
Professional competences of (Primary) EFL Teachers

Bianca Roters

EFL teachers’ knowledge, their professionalism and modes of professionalization are aspects of a genuine interdisciplinary field of research with diverse theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches. Often, educational researchers draw upon the US-American discourse on teacher professionalization, in particular the theoretical framework of professional knowledge developed by Shulman (1986, 1987). The theoretical dimensions of foreign language teachers’ professionalism (e.g. Grossman, 1990) provide a coherent framework for an empirical investigation. The quantitative study Teacher Education and Development Study – Learning to Teach (TEDS-LT) was the first of its kind that measured the professional knowledge of pre-service teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) at the end of their Bachelor and Master studies. At the level of teaching English at primary school, there is distinct research on students’ language competences, EFL teachers’ perspective on early language teaching, and on the effectiveness of an early start (e.g. the EVENING-study).

The talk and subsequent paper will focus on recent developments in EFL research, arguing that a shift from an evaluation of students’ competences to teachers’ professionalism is under way. Theoretical approaches as well as selected findings that investigate foreign and second language teachers’ knowledge will be discussed. In addition to that, selected findings from mainly qualitative studies that explore multiple facets of EFL teachers’ professionalism, e.g. subjective theories, their professional biography, and reflective practices will be presented. In light of recent research findings, the paper concludes with an evaluation of different models of language teachers’ professional development.

References

