OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Our experts advise on

Pre-primary English: how to do it well

What is this paper about?

When should children start learning English? And, more importantly, how should English be introduced? This paper explores the rationale behind introducing English in **pre-primary education** and looks at how it can be done effectively. It highlights the importance of doing so in ways that are developmentally appropriate and aligned with how young children learn, embracing play-based experiences and child-centred approaches. The paper concludes that rather than focusing solely on language outcomes, we should be making a commitment to support children's holistic development, well-being, and positive connection with language learning from an early age.

So, what should happen next?

We should aim to introduce English in pre-primary education in a way that aligns with how young children learn best—through **play**, exploration, and meaningful experiences—while prioritizing their holistic development.

Key takeaways

1

We are developing children

Holistic development should be at the heart of pre-primary education, with language development being only one part of **the whole child**'s growth.

2

We are educating through English

We create opportunities for children to explore the world, play, learn, and grow through English.

3

We are introducing languages

Early language exposure reveals the existence of different languages, fostering an interest in languages and building a foundation for future language learning.

4

We are connecting

Language learning is about making connections—within the child, between languages, and among educators and families.

5

We are understanding

Educational management needs to understand that teaching pre-primary children requires additional appreciation of those early development stages, as well as a strong communicative proficiency in the language to support natural, spontaneous interaction and language-rich play.

Contents

Introduction

In many parts of the world, English is being introduced to children as a new or additional language at an increasingly younger age. This trend creates opportunities to align language learning with the naturally curious and creative spirit of young children. However, it has also sparked greater awareness of what is actually happening in pre-primary English **sessions**, raising questions about the quality, appropriateness and policies (if any), and whether they truly align with the way children learn.[1] The contexts in which English sessions take place can vary widely, making it difficult to reach a consensus on best practices for introducing English at this stage.

Pre-primary education takes place in a variety of settings, including large bilingual schools, private language providers and state preschools, each operating within widely varying frameworks and policies. This level of education is often known by a variety of interchangeable terms: pre-school, pre-primary, early years, early childhood education, nursery or kindergarten.[2] However, one constant, across all contexts, is the age group it serves: pre-primary education targets children from the age of three until the official school entry age of the country, typically around the age of six. Another common feature in most countries is that this level of education is not usually compulsory.

The level of exposure to English varies significantly depending on the context. Around the world, institutions offer a wide range of formats, from a single 30-minute session per week to several 90-minute sessions. Some programmes divide 90 minutes into three 30-minute sessions on different days to offer more frequent and consistent exposure. Unlike foreign or additional language contexts, bilingual schools often incorporate daily English sessions with two to three hours of contact time. In immersion contexts, English is the primary language of instruction throughout most or all of the school day.

Pre-primary education takes place in a wide range of contexts, with equally diverse types of teachers responsible for the introduction of English. Some work with the same group of children once a week, while others see them daily. They might be bilingual or plurilingual mainstream educators who switch into the new language for some periods. Some are practitioners with a strong foundation in educating pre-primary children with varying levels of expertise in language education; others are trained in English language education, like a primary-level language teacher, with or without knowledge of childhood education. While some educators have a limited command of the English language, others are fully proficient. This variety in teaching profiles and contexts makes it difficult to identify a single best practice for introducing English in pre-primary education, as no universal approach applies to every setting.

Given this variety of contexts, this paper highlights the need to focus on how these children learn new languages and the importance of meeting their developmental needs. It emphasizes play-based experiences and child-centred approaches which align with natural learning processes, rather than formal or more academic English teaching.

Sections

1

Why does English in pre-primary matter?
The first section considers why English is increasingly being introduced at pre-primary level, and whether early exposure to a new language is beneficial or not for this age group. Consideration is also given to what conditions are necessary for English to be successfully implemented, such as considering the age-appropriacy of activities and making sure that learning happens through play.

2

The challenges of introducing English in pre-primary
The second section considers the challenges and issues that may arise from inappropriate approaches to the introduction of a new language in the early years. Anyone working in pre-primary education should prioritize the way in which children learn best, which includes child-centred and play-based approaches. The main focus should always be on pre-primary children's unique developmental needs.

3

Suggestions for a successful introduction
The last section offers some practical considerations for implementation in pre-primary contexts, making sure that it is age-appropriate and centred on the needs of the child. Teachers can support pre-primary children's needs and developmental processes by making adaptations to the way they introduce English.

Conclusions

This paper argues that introducing English in pre-primary education should be guided by a careful consideration of who the children are, what they need in order to learn and develop, how they acquire a new language, and under which conditions early exposure to English can be most beneficial. Research into early foreign language learning has been growing steadily, likely due to its increasing implementation, providing valuable insights into effective practices. Both research and classroom observations suggest that child-centred approaches best support the natural ways in which young children explore, grow and learn.

Appendices, Glossary, References and Resources

Key terms in bold are explained in the Glossary. Appendices, Further reading and resources, and References can be found at the end of this paper.

1 Why does English in pre-primary matter?

Until relatively recently, English was not introduced until the start of formal education, typically around the age of six. However, in many contexts, it is increasingly being introduced to pre-primary children. This section explores whether such early exposure to a new language is beneficial, and identifies the conditions necessary for its successful implementation.

> Languages are a natural part of a child's world, from their first baby talk, to their home language, to every new language they encounter. They aren't a subject to study, but an infinite world to be lived.
>
> Sarah Hillyard

Why do we introduce English in pre-primary education?

As most pre-primary educators know, young children are naturally enthusiastic about, and have positive attitudes towards, learning a new language. Children are naturally curious; they want to explore the world, test their ideas, play, discover and learn. These qualities, paired with high-quality instruction, help build motivation and lay a strong foundation for future language learning.[3]

Researchers have theorized about a 'magic' period for language learning, during which young children's brains show a high level of 'plasticity'; that is, they are highly malleable and adaptable. Ellis (2014, p. 76) explains that this idea 'is based on the assumption that young children will be able to pick up a foreign language with the same ease as they learn their mother tongue, drawing on the concept of a critical or sensitive period.'[4]

This perception has led to widespread enthusiasm among parents and educators, who view children as 'sponges', absorbing language effortlessly. Though not compulsory in most educational systems, early English instruction is often sought out by parents, who see it as an investment in their child's future, believing it will create greater opportunities for success. Consequently, schools are increasingly offering English in pre-primary years, and publishers are developing age-appropriate materials to cater to this growing demand. For many institutions, offering English at this stage has become a powerful selling point, attracting increasing numbers of families.[5] Additionally, many governments are now implementing policies to introduce English at an earlier age.

Is younger better?

It is easy to believe so. Many parents, educators and school leaders are convinced, celebrating the rewarding moments when children produce their first words in English. While these reactions are well intentioned, such glimpses of success should not be mistaken for guaranteed long-term language proficiency or early bilingualism, nor are they evidence that younger is always better. Research into age and foreign language acquisition challenges this assumption, showing that older learners, particularly in formal classroom settings, often progress more rapidly due to their advanced cognitive abilities, abstract understanding, motivation and learning strategies.[6]

Why, then, is English being introduced at an increasingly younger age? Should we reconsider this trend? And how can we be sure that it makes sense to do so? Simply starting early does not guarantee successful language acquisition; the key lies in the conditions under which young children learn. Cortina-Pérez and Andúgar (2021, p. 43) state that many stakeholders still maintain that 'the most appropriate onset age is "as soon as possible", but it is necessary to guarantee the optimate teaching conditions in terms of quality of the exposition of the language, adequate methodology and holistic learning'.[7] In other words, younger is only better when the right conditions are in place.

> When introducing English in pre-primary education, we must remember that the child at this age is unique—emotionally, cognitively and socially. Our approaches must be tailored to this singular stage of development.
>
> Beatriz Cortina-Pérez

What are the right conditions for language learning in pre-primary?

Learning happens through play

> *Play is indeed the child's work, and the means whereby he grows and develops.*
>
> Susan Isaacs, 1949, in Graham, 2009, p. 203

One of the most important conditions for successful early language learning is that language needs to be embedded in play and **play-like activities** that align with young children's natural learning processes. Play is fundamental in early childhood because it allows children to explore, interact and make sense of their world in a developmentally appropriate way. English should be introduced through a rich variety of playful contexts, including stories, songs, chants, rhymes, games, drama, arts and crafts, experiments and projects, alongside opportunities for **child-initiated play**. With effective **scaffolding**, foreign language learning can take place not

only in developmentally appropriate teacher-led play-like activities, but also through child-initiated experiences.

Andúgar and Cortina-Pérez (2018) emphasize the vital role of play in language learning, stating: 'Children want to discover the world around them, want to enjoy games and pauses, want to be spoken to significatively and to experiment, want to discuss and reflect. They want to be children.' (p. 219) We must allow them to do just that—learning, whatever the subject, in a way that comes naturally to them.

Learning is developmentally appropriate

Making English sessions with younger children child-centred and play-based ensures that they align with the developmental needs of this age group. At this stage, children are building foundational skills such as turn-taking, active listening, emotional regulation, fine and gross motor skills (such as catching a ball, using scissors or holding a pencil) and cognitive development. These social, emotional, physical and cognitive needs are all essential for effective language acquisition and are best supported by play-based learning.

> *The most significant difference between pre-primary-aged children and other groups of language learners is that they are developing in all areas at an enormous rate: cognitively, physically, emotionally and socially, as well as linguistically.* Mourão & Ellis, 2020, p. 11

However, there are significant differences between a three-year-old and a four-year-old, just as there are between a four-year-old and a five-year-old, in terms of readiness and developmental milestones. Table 1 demonstrates these differences across key areas of development.[8]

	Three-year-olds	Four-year-olds	Five-year-olds
Social development	Parallel play. Begins to show interest in others' play. Learning to share.	Begins to play in groups. Finds it easier to take turns and share, although may need support from adults.	Cooperative play. Finds it easier to take into consideration what others suggest.
Emotional development	Starts to understand how they are feeling. Easily frustrated. Needs help to regulate emotions.	Can express their own feelings. Begins to manage frustration better.	Can express their feelings with more justification. Greater self-regulation.
Cognitive development	Limited problem-solving. Limited understanding of time concepts. Recites some numbers in sequence.	Begins to understand cause and effect. Begins to understand more about time concepts. Recites numbers 1 to 10 in order. Knows that numerals can represent quantity, sometimes matches numeral and quantity correctly.	Shows an interest in solving simple problems. Understands time. Recites numbers beyond 10. Recognizes numerals to represent some numbers.
Linguistic development	Listens to and follows stories, sometimes with an adult's help. Learns new words quickly. Uses words to communicate with others.	Listens to stories with increasing attention; joins in. Uses vocabulary which reflects personal experiences and language to express thoughts and ideas.	Uses language to organise thinking, ideas, feelings. Extends vocabulary beyond personal experiences. Uses language to role play and pretend.
Physical development	Can squat and rise independently. Copies simple shapes, like circles and lines.	Can stand momentarily on one foot. Can catch a large ball. Draws lines and circles. Begins to cut with child scissors. Can copy some letters, e.g. letters from their name.	Can balance on one foot. Handles objects and painting and writing tools safely and with increasing control.
Creative development	Joins in with singing songs and reciting rhymes. Experiments with blocks, colours and marks.	Sings a few familiar songs. Engages in building, stacking and balancing, using a variety of construction materials. Explores colour mixing. Engages in imaginative role play based on own first-hand experiences.	Engages in a repertoire of songs and rhymes. Engages in role plays recognizing others' feelings. Selects tools and techniques needed to shape, assemble and join materials.

Table 1. Key areas of development

Although developmental stages outline typical patterns of development for specific age groups—acknowledging that children develop at their own pace and reach milestones at different rates—they offer valuable insights into how languages should be introduced in an integrated way. They help establish realistic expectations and highlight the importance of play-based, creative, interactive, exploratory and meaningful approaches to learning.

> The main challenges are that pre-primary children have a short attention span, limited language ability, emotional dependency, need for physical activity and limited understanding of instructions.
>
> Thusitha, Teacher, Sri Lanka

Age-appropriacy and a consideration for the pre-primary brain

Unlike older learners, pre-primary children do not consciously sit down to study language, nor do they respond well to explicit instruction on form and meaning. They are not yet capable of abstract thinking, nor are they physically or cognitively ready for formal reading and writing. Instead, the plasticity of children's brains allows for the effective formation of new connections in response to experiential learning[9] as they are naturally wired to learn through experience, interaction and engagement. Additionally, their attention spans are short, their memory is still developing, and while they may appear to acquire new vocabulary rapidly, they also forget quickly if it is not reinforced through meaningful and repeated exposure. Sensory input plays a crucial role in their learning

process, making structured yet flexible routines with multisensory involvement essential. These approaches help reinforce language learning in ways that align with the way their brains learn best.

Quality and quantity

Another condition for successful early language learning, particularly in a foreign-language context, is the quality and quantity of exposure to the new language. It might seem counter-intuitive, but teaching English to pre-primary children requires a good level of English. High-quality language development involves rich, **comprehensible input** that is contextualized and supported by gestures and visuals. In addition, it requires consistent opportunities for children to actively use and practise the new language in interactive and meaningful situations. The amount of exposure is equally important—language learning is more effective when sessions are frequent, ongoing and consistent. For example, a single 90-minute session per week is less beneficial than shorter, more regular sessions spread throughout the week, which ensure repeated exposure and reinforcement of the language.

Connections are made between languages

A child's first exposure to a new language plays an important role in shaping future attitudes towards language learning. For young learners, learning a new language means acknowledging that multiple languages exist in addition to their first language (**L1**). This realization expands their understanding of the world, introducing them to diverse places, cultures and ways of communicating. It is the beginning of a process of understanding the interconnectedness of language systems, and can foster an appreciation of other languages. Additionally, Van Avermart (2024) highlights the importance of early multilingual exposure in promoting inclusive practices, openness to other cultures and respect for diversity.[10]

> Introducing languages in preschool is about opening a door to discovery—it's not about learning a language.
>
> Sandie Mourão

Bilingual education experts suggest that rather than compartmentalizing languages, young children develop what is known as **flexible bilingualism** as they draw connections between the different languages they engage with.[11] Therefore, welcoming children's use of their L1 in the English **learning space** allows them to make strong connections between multiple languages, supporting their overall development and confidence and validating their cultural backgrounds. These connections are not only linguistic, but also emotional. A child finds comfort in their **home language**—which strengthens their well-being and sense of belonging in the learning space.

Connections are made within the development of the whole child

In the *Handbook of CLIL in Pre-Primary Education*, Otto and Cortina-Pérez (2023) emphasize the importance of developmentally appropriate practices that recognize the interconnectedness of cognitive, social, emotional and physical growth.[12] Play-based, child-centred activity types that align with a child's developmental stage support this holistic development. For example, storytelling can promote multiple areas of growth:

- cognitive development
- emotional intelligence and empathy
- musical awareness, through rhythmic refrains and sounds
- mathematical development, if applicable
- linguistic development, as the language is embedded in an enjoyable, play-like activity.

Connections are made with others

Children learn best in connection with others, as learning is fundamentally a social process. Circle time is a typical feature of pre-primary education, where children and educators come together as valued members of a group, gradually fostering a sense of belonging and well-being. There is a communal feeling in shared experiences, such as with games, where everyone has the opportunity to participate in their own way; in songs, where some children hum, others tap their feet to the beat and some sing wholeheartedly; and in story time, when some prefer to listen and others eagerly join in with the storytelling.

Strong connections between home and school are essential for holistic child development. Ragnarsdóttir (2020) explores the role of educational partnerships between teachers, parents, and children, emphasizing how these relationships support both language development and social-emotional growth.[13] Similarly, Mourão and Ellis (2020) introduce the Communication Triangle, which links the home, the learning environment and the child—each playing a vital role in integrating the new language into daily life.[14] Effective communication fosters a shared understanding of each child's holistic development, clarifies pre-primary learning goals and ensures the establishment of clear expectations. Learning a new language at this stage does not mean becoming fully bilingual; rather, it nurtures enjoyment and lays the foundation for future language learning in a child-centred way. Ultimately, the importance of supporting the whole child requires the connection of everything and everyone.

What do I need to know?

This section emphasizes that introducing English at an earlier age can only be effective if specific developmental and educational factors are addressed. Effective pre-primary language education supports whole-child development, encourages language exploration and builds strong connections between children, families and educators. The approach should be holistic, emphasizing play-based, child-centred experiences tailored to pre-primary children's needs and emotional well-being. When introduced under the right conditions, early language learning becomes part of learning about the world, sparking curiosity for languages and cultural awareness. In sum, early language learning offers significant benefits, but it must always be age-appropriate.

The challenges of introducing English in pre-primary

Without the conditions outlined in Section 1, introducing English at an earlier age may not necessarily be beneficial. The challenges stem from various factors, including unrealistic expectations and misconceptions, which are often evident in diverse pre-primary contexts.

Objectives

A widespread misconception exists regarding what should be introduced in pre-primary English education. This misunderstanding arises not only from those directly responsible for teaching English in pre-primary settings, but also from school management and parents' expectations. Often, there is an attempt to replicate the linguistic aims designed for older learners, where success is measured by achievable language goals. In some contexts, teachers responsible for introducing English do not align their objectives with the pre-primary frameworks, which focus on foundational development goals. Sometimes, teachers discover that no clear objectives exist, or they are not made aware of existing guidelines, making it difficult for them to structure their own objectives. In some cases, the lack of policy or official curriculum, perhaps due to non-compulsory attendance at this level, further complicates the issue.[15]

However, clear guidelines are essential, as they provide a structured framework for integrating English as a tool to support holistic child development. The introduction of a new language should not diverge from the mainstream curriculum, but rather work alongside it, reinforcing the same developmental goals. Furthermore, when English activities align with what children are learning—whether that constitutes concepts related to nature, basic numeracy or emotional regulation—connections are strengthened, making learning more meaningful. Ultimately, the goal is not to teach English, but to contribute to the whole child's growth and development through English.

Approach

Pre-primary learners need a playful, sensory-rich, emotional approach, whereas primary learners are ready for more structured and collaborative activities.

Hesham Radwan,
Senior English Teacher, Egypt

In many contexts, English is being taught to children in much the same way as it is to older learners. This is often because pre-primary education is increasingly influenced by primary-level practices, and many teachers come from a background in teaching English to older children. However, most traditional ELT methodologies—characterized by rigid language goals, explicit language instruction, worksheet-based tasks and early **literacy** skills—were not designed with young children in mind. Murphy and Evangelou (2016) highlight a growing pedagogical focus in some contexts on memorization and copying, which, they state, are not actually supported by the educators, but align instead with parental expectations.[16] A limited understanding of early childhood development can result in approaches that are developmentally inappropriate.

This trend aligns with the concept of '**schoolification**', where pre-primary education increasingly adopts more formal, academic practices more typical of primary school, often without sufficient consideration of whether these approaches truly meet the developmental needs of young learners. Resnick (2007) highlights this shift, noting that kindergartens are increasingly focusing on rote learning and worksheet completion at the expense of creative, play-based, exploratory learning, which is vital for young children's development.[17]

> *Kindergarten is undergoing a dramatic change. For nearly 200 years, since the first kindergarten opened in 1837, kindergarten has been a time for telling stories, building castles, drawing pictures and learning to share. But that is starting to change. Today, more and more kindergarten children are spending time filling out phonics worksheets and memorizing math flashcards. In short, kindergarten is becoming more like the rest of school.*
>
> Resnick, 2007, p. 1

Sometimes, there is a lack of awareness among teachers that pre-primary children can learn from playing.

Janet Valdez,
English Coordinator, Peru

Unfortunately, play-based activities are not always taken seriously, and the concept of 'play' is not universally understood among educators. Many English language teachers with a background in primary education interpret 'play' as referring to language learning games. For pre-primary children, though, the word 'play' encompasses a wide range of meanings: action, experiencing, imagining, drama, make-believe, rule-following, role-playing. Activities such as storytelling, building towers, playing hide-and-seek, miming animals, smelling flowers or observing objects as they sink or float—all these constitute play for a child, and playing is how they learn. Language development, then, is encouraged through enjoyable, playful experiences.

Evidently, the approach to introducing English in an early-years context should be different from that applied at later stages because pre-primary children's brains learn in fundamentally different ways from older learners' brains. Children need linguistic experiences that match their cognitive and emotional development, rather than being fast-tracked into literacy and academic learning. At this stage, English learning should be embedded within early childhood pedagogy, allowing language development to arise naturally from the way children explore, interact and learn.

Lack of collaboration

A significant issue in many pre-primary contexts is the limited collaboration between professionals and families. In many cases, teams of professionals are not given sufficient opportunities to communicate and collaborate, and they have to find their own ways of doing so. Too often, English teachers work in isolation, with minimal connection to other educators or the children's families, and without insight into the children's development in their first language or home environment. Yet such collaboration is crucial for tracking children's overall development and ensuring that language learning aligns with their broader educational goals.

English-only policies

> Even if children seem to be 'confused' by the words or grammar of the **L2** at first, they are anything but: what is often misinterpreted as 'confusion' is actually a sign that learning is taking place!
>
> Faidra Faitaki

Another misconception involves English-only policies, which discourage the use of the children's L1 in the classroom. This approach, more typical of older-learner classrooms, often stems from negative perceptions of code-switching, code-mixing and L1 use.[18] These practices have often been associated with the idea of '**interference**', leading educators to promote strict separation between languages because of its alleged harm.[19] However, we now understand that interference is a sign that connections are being made, and that learning is happening as children process and (inter)connect their linguistic repertoires. We now know that adopting a monolingual mindset does not allow children to make the necessary connections between languages to comprehend their systems, notice their similarities and differences, and enjoy learning new languages. This is where **translanguaging**—the dynamic process in which learners use all their linguistic resources and move fluidly between languages to make meaning and communicate effectively—plays a significant role in early language education. While teachers should provide consistent input in the target language, children should be allowed to use the language they feel most comfortable with when they lack the tools in English. The teacher can then recast or paraphrase the child's utterances into English to provide that input. Rather than viewing this practice as a weakness, embracing the children's first language in the classroom fosters a positive and inclusive environment. This approach not only facilitates communication, but also supports the child's sense of identity, belonging and confidence.

Role of teachers

Pre-primary contexts vary widely, as do teachers' knowledge and experience with pre-primary pedagogy or foreign language instruction. Often, school management assigns educators with a limited command of the language to teach English to pre-primary children, wrongly assuming that language proficiency is not an issue when working with younger children. However, teaching in a pre-primary setting requires a great deal of spontaneity, and as such, teachers need a stronger command of English to be able to respond naturally in a variety of interactions. There is a need for teachers who understand both the development stages of very young children and the principles of early language acquisition, and who have

the necessary linguistic competence to teach through English in an age-appropriate way.

Terminology

One challenge may stem from the terminology we use to describe the introduction of languages in pre-primary education. The word *teaching* may not accurately reflect the role of educators in this context. Alternatives such as *nurturing*, *educating* or *introducing a language* might better reflect the process, which is more about using the language as a vehicle to develop other skills, rather than formally teaching grammar, forms and meanings. Similarly, the word ***classroom*** might lead us to think of a room with desks and chairs... or is it a *learning space* or a *learning environment*, where play, movement and creativity are welcomed? Some educators use the term *young learners* as a generic term to refer to children from all school levels, from pre-primary through to secondary education. Others use the term to refer to children in pre-primary and primary education. More specific terms, such as *pre-schoolers*, *very young learners*, *infants* or *kindergarteners*, are important, as these learners are distinct from older primary children.[20] The terms we use matter because each age group has specific developmental characteristics and requirements.

What do I need to know?

This section has outlined the key challenges of introducing English to pre-primary children using approaches that do not align with their developmental stage. To address these issues, it is essential that anyone working in pre-primary education prioritize the way in which children learn best. Child-centred, play-based approaches that cater to children's unique developmental needs must be the main focus. The next section will provide practical suggestions that help connect children with a new language while nurturing their holistic development.

3 Suggestions for a successful introduction

Having established the importance of ensuring age-appropriate English instruction in pre-primary education, and having identified some of the problems involved, we now present some practical ideas that educators can implement to support the successful introduction of English in their own pre-primary contexts.

For English to be introduced successfully in pre-primary education, teachers should integrate language learning into the child's overall development.

Rather than focusing solely on linguistic or academic goals, educators should plan activities that also support physical, social, emotional, creative and cognitive development. These broader aims will help define the type of play-like activities that are most appropriate. For example:

- To develop coordination skills, use movement-based activities, action songs and finger rhymes.
- To promote social skills, introduce games, shared storytelling and role play.
- To support fine motor development, engage children in crafts, sensory bin play and handling small objects.

Teachers should understand how young children's brains develop and be able to identify what they need at each stage.

All educators working with pre-primary learners need a strong understanding of how children's brains work and how children develop at different stages. This knowledge should, in turn, inform their teaching practices. Table 2 lays out critical early-years milestones (shown in Column 2), categorized according to developmental stage (Column 1). These are not only theoretical underpinnings; they have practical implications for lesson planning and delivery (shown in Column 3).[21]

> Sometimes it is hard to find age-appropriate material and to always keep them interested. Teachers have to be really resourceful, be skilled in arts and crafts, be creative, good at storytelling and much more.
>
> Venera Melkonyan, EFL Instructor, Armenia

	Milestones	Implications for the classroom
Three-year-olds	are more focused on exploring their immediate environment. show an interest in what is directly familiar to them. demonstrate short spurts of attention. lack some development in motor skills. need instructions to be short and concise. have a limited vocabulary, even in their L1.	Use toys and classroom objects. Engage in conversations about their families, toys, belongings, likes and dislikes. Introduce simple, repetitive songs to build familiarity. Use lots of play-like activities that are short and dynamic. Introduce action songs with simple movements and commands. Give one-step instructions. Allow for physical responses, like pointing, showing, touching.
Four-year-olds	are developing better motor control. are often more engaged in imaginative play with others. can handle more complex instructions. can express themselves better.	Do simple crafts, offer painting tools and child scissors. Plan simple role plays, character dramatizations, group games. Start giving instructions for a craft broken up into steps. Introduce models of language used to communicate needs and preferences.
Five-year-olds	have a more advanced vocabulary. have better control over their emotions. show increased ability to focus on tasks for longer periods of time.	Provide lots of opportunities to practise learned language in a variety of play-like activities. Incorporate imaginative play to use language in familiar contexts (e.g. role-playing going to the supermarket). Start to introduce pair and group work to practise turn-taking, sharing and frustration tolerance. Allow for more focused observations, thinking, predictions and deeper learning.

Table 2. Critical early milestones

Teachers should use approaches that align with the way children naturally learn. Let them play!

Once teachers have understood young children's characteristics and developmental stages, planning should reflect approaches suited to that age group—approaches that embed English naturally into the way children explore, investigate and learn by doing. Through playful experiences, they soak up and begin to use English in authentic ways.

Approaches teachers could use include the following:

- Use Total Physical Response (TPR) to give commands and encourage physical response.
- Set up a make-believe fruit and vegetable shop, where children can interact in dramatic play.
- Create sensory bins with sand, feely bags, mystery boxes or water trays to explore texture or size.
- Play picture-card games such as Pelmanism, realia games such as Kim's game, and board games such as Noughts and Crosses.
- Sing songs and do action rhymes and finger plays.
- Tell and retell stories, encouraging children to gradually join in and dramatize scenes.
- Plan a treasure hunt with simple clues to practise language around position, colour and objects.
- Do simple experiments, like finding out which of their plastic, wooden or metal toys sink and which float.
- Go outdoors and explore nature. What can they see, smell and touch?

I find the best way to teach pre-primary children is through songs, rhymes and chants. The songs should always be accompanied by gestures.

Marina, English teacher, Spain

Use English as a vehicle

Rather than treating English as a formal subject to be taught explicitly with strict objectives, teachers should use it as a vehicle for learning and development across a range of meaningful activities such as storytelling, songs, games and creative play, where language emerges naturally in its context. Here are some examples of how English can arise naturally in context:

- Singing 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes' reinforces key body vocabulary through movement and rhythm.
- An experiment that looks at which toys sink and which float will naturally require the use of toy vocabulary and words like *sink*, *float* and *water*.
- Routines provide repeated exposure to useful phrases, for example 'Let's wash our hands—wash, wash, wash!'
- Predictable stories like 'Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?' (by Bill Martin Jr) encourage children to join in using repeated phrases.

Provide comprehensible input

For most pre-primary children, exposure to English is limited compared to immersive contexts, so it is essential that teachers provide plenty of comprehensible input. With consistent, high-quality exposure to the language, children will pick up useful phrases and language and incorporate these into their own linguistic repertoire. To support this, teachers should:

- speak clearly, using simple, repetitive language;
- model natural phrases using self-talk, such as 'Hmm, where's my red crayon? Oh, here it is!';
- use effective forms of visual support, such as gestures, visuals, realia, props and facial expressions;
- repeat language frequently in a variety of meaningful contexts and play situations.

Use age-appropriate materials

Materials play a crucial role in pre-primary classrooms, as young learners learn best through tangible resources and visuals. While commercially produced materials are available, creative teachers prefer to make their own to better match specific stories, songs and experiences they plan for. Effective materials include:

- flashcards
- posters
- puppets
- dice
- props
- picture books
- felt boards
- sensory bins
- feely bags
- mystery boxes
- rhyming word picture cards
- maths manipulatives.

In addition, items that connect with songs and stories help bring language to life, making learning more immersive and memorable. Everyday classroom objects, realia and loose parts also serve as valuable resources for hands-on learning.

Balance teacher-led and child-initiated moments

Saying that language should not be taught in a traditional way in pre-primary contexts does not mean that teacher-led moments are not important. In fact, effective learning often begins with guidance from the teacher and gradually moves towards child-led activities. For example, a teacher might introduce key phrases during a storytelling session before children retell or act out the story themselves using that language.

Start with teacher-initiated activities

These should be:

- developmentally appropriate and play-like: games, songs, stories, experiments, drama, arts and crafts, outdoor games;
- focused on maximizing language input: circle time, storytime, input from teacher-led games and songs;
- designed to guide purposeful engagement with English with ample teacher support: practising language in routines and games, singing songs, joining in during story time;
- supported by a variety of age-appropriate materials: picture cards, posters, puppets, props, realia, etc.;
- scaffolded through recasting, visuals, gestures and other language-conducive strategies.

> When teaching pre-primary children, we should focus on: play-based learning; short, active sessions; songs, stories and visual aids; routine and repetition; emotional support and simple language.
>
> Seyedrouzbeh Banihashemi, English teacher, Thailand

Move on to child-initiated play

This should be characterized by:

- exploration and play, where language emerges naturally;
- re-enactment of teacher-initiated play-like activities;
- materials that prompt the use of the target language. For example, animal flashcards will prompt animal vocabulary, a picture book

will naturally allow the text to emerge, and puppets will provide opportunities to use communicative phrases.

While teacher-led activities ensure intentional exposure to language, child-initiated play is equally important in enabling children to take ownership of their language learning. It builds confidence and encourages independence in the use of the language. See Appendix 5 for an example of how child-initiated play can reinforce language after teacher-led activities.

Focus on oracy to support literacy

As with the mother tongue, children need a solid foundation in **oracy** skills—listening and speaking—before learning to read and write. Children must be exposed to rich and varied oral input and given ample opportunities to practise using it. Developing strong oracy skills lays the foundation for literacy, and this begins with phonological awareness—understanding and recognizing sounds in the language. This is particularly important for English, a language with a complex sound–spelling relationship and a less predictable phoneme–grapheme correspondence. As such, early exposure to its rhythm, intonation and phonemes is essential. As Lau and Van Viegen (2020) explain, 'The starting point of literacy development in pre-primary children learning English is the acquisition of phonological and phonemic awareness, which are considered the primary factors determining success in the future development of reading for a child'.[22]

The place to start is with pre-literacy skills, using playful, engaging activities that help children tune in to the sounds of English. Rhymes, songs and storytelling—with their natural patterns, repetition, rhyme, rhythm and sounds—are particularly powerful tools for building early awareness. These experiences help children to develop key listening and speaking skills, while also developing the ability to segment and manipulate sounds, a critical skill for future reading and writing success.

Embrace the children's L1

While it is important for teachers to use the target language to maximize input, the children's L1 can, and should, be included in a variety of ways:

- Allow children to use their L1 to express ideas if they do not have the linguistic tools to do so in English yet.
- Rephrase their utterances in English to help bridge the gap between L1 and the target language (L2) while providing L2 input.
- Highlight words that share similar roots. Invite the children to say the equivalent word in their own language and to notice their similarities. For example, a Spanish-speaking child might discover that the word *piano* is the same or similar in English. This kind of discovery can boost confidence.
- Encourage children to share how they greet each other in their home language. By asking them to talk about what they normally do in social situations, the teacher shows a genuine interest in the child and their world, and may discover similarities.
- Explore songs across languages. Nursery rhymes like 'Incy wincy spider' or 'Twinkle twinkle little star' exist in many different languages. You could ask questions like: 'Do you know this song in your own language?' 'Could you sing it to us?'

Teachers should connect and collaborate with everyone involved.

Collaborate and connect with parents

- Set up regular parent–teacher meetings so parents feel more involved.
- Send newsletters to make parents aware of events or activities.
- Create home–school links, for example by sending home crafts connected with songs or stories.
- Clarify expectations to parents and communicate the real aims of the English programme.
- Communicate openly about the development of the child, both linguistically and more broadly.

Collaborate and connect with other educators

- Set up regular planning meetings to align processes and goals.
- Share insights into the development of the children.
- Collaborate on cross-curricular activities.
- Ensure consistency in how English is integrated.
- Cross-check that English aims align with the broader goals of the pre-primary section.
- Integrate themes and activities to strengthen connections and make learning more cohesive.

Assess accordingly

In pre-primary contexts, assessment should focus on each child's progress, rather than on traditional testing methods. Teachers can monitor and document progress through the following:

- Anecdotal notes: these are not only for recording moments where a child uses the target language, but also for monitoring their enjoyment and engagement. Do they seem happy? Do they listen to others? Do they enjoy stories?
- Portfolios: these can include children's work, drawings, crafts and other artwork. (Digital portfolios may include recordings of songs or videos of interactions, if permitted.)

- Checklists with written comments: these help the teacher to monitor developments such as responding to simple questions or joining in with songs, alongside a personalized comment about the child's progress.
- Photographs or videos (where allowed): these allow parents to get a perspective of their child's performance in their English sessions.
- Children's own self-assessment and feedback: many teachers like to come back to circle time at the end of the day to encourage children to reflect on their learning and provide some feedback. Teachers might do this by showing the materials or props that were used and asking questions such as: 'What was your favourite part of today? Did you like the song/story/craft/game?' Teachers can provide tools such as coloured traffic light circles or smiley face cards to help children express their feelings about the day's activities.

Continue professional development

Continuous professional development is essential for teachers to stay up to date with best practices and current research in early childhood education. Teachers should actively seek opportunities to improve their skill. However, the responsibility for training should not fall on individual teachers alone; institutions, schools and other stakeholders should promote a community of practice and lifelong learning.

Trust school management

School managers play a key role in supporting the successful introduction of English to young children. They should aim to provide high-quality sessions with well-trained educators and frequent exposure to the language, such as three 30-minute sessions a week, which is likely to be more effective than one 90-minute session. Additionally, they should foster a culture of collaboration among staff, offer continuous professional development opportunities, and ensure that teachers have access to the resources, time and support to implement developmentally appropriate and engaging approaches.

What do I need to know?

This section has outlined practical strategies for ensuring that the introduction of English in pre-primary education is age-appropriate and centred on the needs of the child. By making certain accommodations that align with the needs and developmental processes of pre-primary children, educators can better support their holistic development—including their emerging language skills—in ways that are meaningful, playful and developmentally appropriate.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the importance of reflecting on how and why English is being introduced in pre-primary education. It has pinpointed the potential problems and consequences of inappropriate approaches, while also offering ways to address these challenges and implement age-appropriate approaches that respond to the unique needs of young children. The ultimate goal when introducing a new language in a pre-primary setting is to create a positive, joyful connection with the language—one that lays the foundation for future learning. Children should not only be learning English, but also developing essential life skills, values and attitudes through English. In this way, maybe younger really can be better, and children will leave their pre-primary days with a love of the language or, even better, a love of learning languages.

Key takeaways

1 We are developing children

Holistic development should be at the heart of pre-primary education, with language development being only one part of the whole child's growth.

2 We are educating through English

We create opportunities for children to explore the world, play, learn and grow through English.

3 We are introducing languages

Early language exposure reveals the existence of different languages, fostering an interest in languages and building a foundation for future language learning.

4 We are connecting

Language learning is about making connections—within the child, between languages and among educators and families.

5 We are understanding

Educational management needs to understand that teaching pre-primary children requires additional appreciation of those early development stages as well as a strong communicative proficiency in the language to support natural, spontaneous interaction and language-rich play.

Appendix 1

Activities for a pre-primary English project

This section presents a sample set of activities that form part of a project in which children explore the different characteristics of fruit, investigate fruits with seeds, and consider all the elements they need to plan a picnic. The objectives outlined at the beginning of this document show how a project of this type supports whole-child development. It is based on how children learn best—though play, discovery and first-hand experiences. The plan includes both teacher-led activities and child-initiated play. What follows is a shortened version of the project: the full version is available here.

Project: Going on a picnic

Big Question: What do we need to go on a picnic?

Ages: 5-6

Children's L1: Spanish

Objectives:

- Musical development: songs and rhymes, following rhythm with shakers
- Intercultural development: discovering fruits from an African country in a story
- Mathematical development: counting and estimating
- Artistic development: fruit painting, making shakers with seeds
- Social development: children play and interact amongst each other, organize a picnic together
- Fine and gross motor skills: miming, waving a parachute, action rhymes, handling seeds
- Understanding the world: learning about fruits and their characteristics (colour, shape, size, hard/soft, where they grow), planting seeds, looking at the weather forecast
- Understanding themselves: learning to express likes and dislikes
- Linguistic development: learning about fruits, their characteristics, seeds, numbers, likes and dislikes

Entry event: Skip into circle time with a basket full of fruit. Say that you want to go on a picnic and show a picture of a picnic scene. Describe the picture. "Yummy, I like apples". Complete a **KWL chart**. Accept L1. Translate into English.

Games, activities, play-like activities

- Pass the basket: 'I like/don't like bananas' + mime eating.
- Engaging with a puppet: Puppet's song: 'Apples and bananas'; Puppet conversation: "Do you like apples? Yes/No, I don't like apples.", Children take turns.
- Teaching the teacher. Children teach the teacher or the puppet how to say the fruit in L1.
- Mystery fruit of the day
- Guess the fruit, Pelmanism, fruit salad, fruit scavenger hunt, bingo
- Notice other words that begin with the 'f' sound (*fish*, *frog*, *fox*, *fly*, *fork*).
- Sorting fruit: size, colour, hard/soft
- Traffic light: pear (green) = run; orange (orange) = walk slowly; apple (red) = stop
- Discovering seeds
- Making musical instruments
- Discovering fruit in a sensory bin
- Blindfolding
- Picnic blanket parachute
- The best weather for a picnic
- Story: *Handa's Surprise*, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, *The Little Mouse*, *The Red Ripe Strawberry*
- Songs and rhymes: 'Apples and bananas', 'Way up high in the apple tree' (finger play), 'Fruit salad'
- Buying fruit / Going on a picnic: role play
- Making a fruit salad / Outing to buy fruit skewers (counting fruit, choosing fruit, comparing fruit)

Free play: Place the different materials you have used in the more teacher-led opportunities on different tables or on the floor of the learning space. Allow children to visit those learning areas to engage with the materials.

Final event: Going on a picnic: ask children how many cups, plates, napkins, spoons/forks they think they might need. Provide more than is needed so they have to count and separate the correct number of each. Go outside and prepare the picnic with the children.

Appendix 2

Checklist: how to include the whole child

This section offers suggestions for supporting whole-child development in your pre-primary sessions. Use this checklist during your planning to ensure that your pre-primary sessions nurture a range of development areas. Aim to integrate activities and approaches that engage as many aspects of the whole child as possible. Keep in mind that there are many other areas of development—ensure you connect with the **mainstream teacher** to find out which are prioritized in your setting's curriculum.

Physical development	Engage in clapping games, action rhymes, ball games, movement activities, running, jumping, balancing, arts and crafts, handling small objects.
Linguistic development	Introduce the language in meaningful contexts: imaginative settings, games, stories, songs, role plays. Use songs, rhymes and chants to practise language, rhythm and pronunciation. Support children joining in and retelling stories. Encourage children to use learned language during free play.
Cognitive development	Try problem-solving, observing, comparing, classifying, sorting, hands-on experiences, experiments, science, making predictions, sequencing (e.g. retelling stories or arranging objects).
Social and emotional development	Create a welcoming and positive learning space. Give praise and positive recognition for effort. Plan pair and group interactive activities to promote teamwork and collaboration. Practise turn-taking in games. Check in with emotional states. Encourage self-expression through drama. Use stories that model positive attitudes and behaviours like empathy and respect.
Creative development	Use arts and crafts, unstructured art, open-ended art materials, loose pieces, recyclable materials, elements from nature, imaginative play, drama, class story creation, replacing key words in songs.
Early literacy development	Point out connections between languages, directionality, environmental print (e.g. labels, signs), shapes. Identify words with the same initial sounds. Do story time, practising turning storybook pages. Encourage correct pencil grip, tracing, drawing.
Musical development	Encourage physical responses to music. Play music games. Practise listening skills with action rhymes, singing songs, following a rhythm, making and playing musical instruments.
Intercultural development	Introduce diverse cultural elements through music, stories, dance, art and traditions. Create opportunities to celebrate the children's home languages and cultures.
Mathematical development	Incorporate counting, sorting, patterns, shapes, size, measuring, comparing, estimating, spatial awareness. Use songs and stories that include mathematical concepts.

Appendix 3

Tips for communication and collaboration between professionals

If English is not yet integrated into mainstream education in your context, these tips will help you communicate and collaborate more closely with other teachers. The aim is to build a collaborative team approach with everyone involved in the education of the same group of pre-primary children. Not all of these suggestions will be possible in every context, but you can start small by trying one or two of them.

- Allocate some shared planning time to discuss session objectives and curriculum aims, and to align goals.
- Plan together so that your choice of activities aligns with the **generalist**'s plans, and your English sessions can support the children's learning.
- Use a shared digital platform to plan lessons collaboratively, ensuring that all professionals involved can contribute ideas and see how activities link across domains.
- Schedule brief weekly/monthly meetings to share insights into individual children's progress, weaknesses and strengths.
- Agree on effective communication methods that suit all professionals involved; this might include online messaging systems, face-to-face meetings, text messaging, etc.
- Conduct peer observations to gain insights into how the group responds to different educators and to better understand what children are learning across contexts.
- Propose a short 'English moment' to be included in the generalist's plan, where the children are responsible for teaching the generalist some English, for example, teaching them a song, retelling a story, playing a game involving specific vocabulary, etc.
- Agree on an approach to set up a learning centre or corner in English. Leave English resources in the room for children to access during free play. These might come in the form of the picture cards that were used for playing Pelmanism or a storybook that you have read together.
- Blend content areas by collaborating across subjects; for example a music teacher could reinforce counting in English while teaching rhythm.
- Plan a team-teaching activity, where both educators teach together; for example, during a sensory exploration activity, the English teacher might ask the children to name objects and describe their colour, and the generalist might follow up by engaging the children in a discussion about their texture or smell.

Appendix 4

Collaboration between an English teacher and a pre-primary mainstream teacher

Mourão and Robinson's chapter 'Facilitating the learning of English through collaborative practice' presents a strong example of effective collaboration between an English teacher and a **pre-primary professional** in an institution in Portugal.[23] In this context, the pre-primary professional is present during English sessions—an encouraging indicator of shared responsibility and an awareness of what is happening in the L2-mediated sessions. A key feature of this collaboration is that the aims of the English programme are not exclusively language based; instead, they align with the broader developmental goals of the pre-primary curriculum. Specifically, some of the aims of the English programme are to cater for the whole child (their physical, social, emotional, psychological and cognitive development); to develop learning skills such as predicting, deducing and hypothesizing; to develop listening and speaking skills; and to build a solid foundation for continued language learning. The chapter provides detailed descriptions of the collaborative practices that led to the success of this approach to introducing English in this context, including:

- shared planning. Both professionals meet regularly to set goals, co-plan their sessions and reflect on their programmes to ensure a seamless and coherent integration of the new language
- working together in the classroom, ensuring a consistent and coherent approach.
- the creation of an English Learning Area (ELA) set up within the classroom as one of several learning areas, making English a visible and accessible part of children's free play
- home–school links. The mainstream teacher involves families by encouraging children to explore English-speaking countries at home and bring their findings and artefacts to class
- collaborative involvement with English. Although it is the English teacher who leads formal English sessions using games, routines, puppets, songs and stories, the mainstream teacher also actively supports English learning through play, songs, routines and child-initiated activities (through use of the ELA).

The chapter provides further details on how shared planning, child-initiated play, an English Learning Area and family involvement contribute to a successful, integrated and collaborative approach.

Appendix 5

How English can be supported during child-initiated play

Here is a summary of how English may be present in child-initiated play moments in English, following teacher-led activities. Findings from Robinson et al. (2015) confirm that combining teacher-led activities with child-initiated activities can positively impact children's language development and more independent use of the language.[24]

Step 1

Introduce the new language in circle time, using comprehensible input with a lot of visual support and through teacher-led play-like activities.

Step 2

Provide opportunities for children to engage with and practise the language in developmentally appropriate teacher-initiated play-like activities.

Step 3

Give children the opportunity to reuse the language they have learned during child-initiated play moments. To facilitate this, ensure that the resources used in the teacher-led English sessions are available to the children during free play. These resources act as prompts, encouraging children to naturally reuse the language that was introduced and practised earlier, in more controlled activities.

Examples of resources to make available include:

- familiar board games
  (for example Noughts and Crosses, Snakes and Ladders)
- picture cards or flashcards
  (for memory games like Pelmanism)
- bingo sheets
- picture books
- puppets
- masks
- props.

Types of child-initiated play

Children may choose to retell a story that was previously told to them by the teacher, or they may play Pelmanism with the same picture cards that they used when playing with the whole group. Alternatively, they may engage in a role play using puppets, revisiting the same conversation they practised previously with their teacher. These opportunities allow children to take on both learner and teacher roles, building their confidence and independence.

When should child-initiated play take place?

These child-initiated moments might happen at the beginning, in the middle, or, more commonly, at the end of a session. Another possibility is to set up a designated English Language Area (ELA) as part of the pre-primary professional's free play moment, alongside all the other learning areas such as science, reading, construction and maths.

How should child-initiated play be structured ?

For this approach to be effective, the teacher should:

- show children the material that is available to them
- prompt children to recall how the material was used during the teacher-led session and encourage them to think about ways to use that material in English
- clearly explain how to use each resource by modelling and demonstrating their use
- remind children that while engaging with these materials, they should use as much English as possible
- be mindful that some of this play might initially occur in the L1. As their confidence and autonomy grow, some words and chunks of language will begin to emerge in the L2.

Glossary

child-initiated play / free play
The exploration of materials and situations that allow children to engage with their environment at their own pace and according to their own interests.

comprehensible input
Language that is made understandable to learners, with the support of strategies such as visuals, gestures or simplified language.

flexible bilingualism
The concept that languages are interconnected, giving an individual the ability to adapt and switch between languages with ease and flexibility.

generalist
An educator with overall responsibility of children in a pre-primary setting, who teaches using the L1 or common setting language.

home language
The language or languages a child learns and uses primarily in their home environment.

interference
The influence of one language on another during the learning process, often erroneously viewed as a hindrance rather than a sign of learning connections.

KWL chart
A graphic organizer that involves recording 'what we know' (previous knowledge), 'what we want to know' (inquiry/questions we have) and, at the end of the project 'what we have learned' (based on both reflection and visible progression of learning).

L1
The common setting language used with the mainstream educator, typically the language spoken in the country.

L2
The target language, whether it is foreign, second or additional.

learning space
A room or learning environment where learning happens in a pre-primary classroom, equivalent to a classroom in a primary setting, although a classroom is where more formal teaching happens.

literacy
The ability to read and write, encompassing a variety of skills.

mainstream teacher
See **generalist**.

oracy
The ability to communicate through spoken language, including speaking and listening skills.

play
The way in which children interact with the world naturally when given the freedom to do so for their own desire; involves activities like free play and child-initiated activities.

play-like activities
Structured, yet playful, teacher-led activities, for example games, songs, nursery rhymes, chants, stories, experiments, role plays.

pre-primary education
The level of education that precedes primary education, usually starting at age three, which is also sometimes referred to as *early years*, *early childhood education*, *preschool* or *kindergarten*.

pre-primary professional
See **generalist**.

scaffolding
The support given to children that is gradually reduced as they gain confidence and independence.

schoolification
The adoption of school-like principles and approaches in a context in early childhood settings, where they are not age-appropriate and are misaligned with the developmental needs of young children.

session
Equivalent to a lesson in a primary classroom, but more flexible and especially designed for young children, emphasizing activities and experiences rather than formal instruction.

translanguaging
The dynamic process of using all linguistic resources; moving fluidly between languages to make meaning and communicate.

the whole child
The comprehensive development of a child's social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic and physical skills.

Further reading and resources

Andúgar, A. & **Cortina-Pérez, B.** (2018). EFL teachers' reflections on their teaching practice in Spanish preschools: A focus on motivation. In M. Schwartz (Ed.), *Preschool bilingual education: Agency in interactions between children, teachers, and parents*. Springer. doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77228-8_8

Cortina-Pérez, B. (2024). Rethinking teacher knowledge base (TKB) for early childhood – additional language teachers. In N. Martínez-León, A. Andúgar & B. Cortina-Pérez (Eds), *Multilingual pedagogies for early years: Theoretical insights and innovative approaches* (pp. 313-334). Peter Lang. hdl.handle.net/10481/101911

Cortina-Pérez, B. & **Andúgar, A.** (2021). Teaching EFL at Spanish preschools: A comparative analysis from two different teachers' perspectives. *Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning*, 11(1), 30-52.

Hillyard, S. *Advancing learning: Helping very young learners improve their collaboration skills*. One Stop English, Macmillan Education. www.onestopenglish.com/advancing-learning/advancing-learning-helping-very-young-learners-improve-their-collaboration-skills/557750.article?fbclid=IwAR3KkkEg2rAeFEKgENc4S1HyUYWrqVz7VU7AoLttdlgfYnsS5mTjnx79to8

Hillyard, S. (2020). *Engaging pre-primary children through varied repetition of songs*. Macmillan Education. www.macmillanenglish.com/us/blog-resources/article/advancing-learning-engaging-pre-primary-children-through-varied-repetition-of-songs

Hillyard, S. (2013). Informal assessment tools in kindergarten. *Argentinian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 45–55. ajal.faapi.org.ar/ojs-3.3.0-5/index.php/AJAL/article/view/214

Mourão, S. & **Ellis, G.** (2020). *Teaching English to pre-primary children. Educating very young children*. Delta Publishing.

Murphy, V. & **Evangelou, M.** (Eds). (2016). *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages*. British Council.

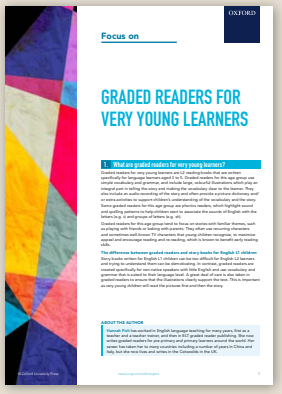
Puchta, H. & **Elliot, K.** (2017). *Activities for very young learners*. Cambridge University Press.

Read, C. (2023). *Teaching and learning English in the early years*. Pavilion ELT.

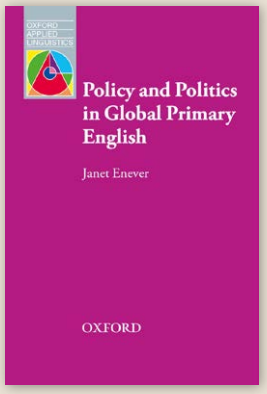
Resnick, M. (2017). *Lifelong kindergarten: Cultivating creativity through projects, passion, peers, and play*. MIT Press.

Robinson, P., **Mourão, S.** & **Kang, N. J.** (2015). *English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: An investigation of their effectiveness.* British Council. www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/case-studies-insights-and-research/english-learning-areas-pre-primary-classrooms . Webinar: www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-and-events/webinars/webinars-teachers/integrating-english-pre-primary-education-use-learning

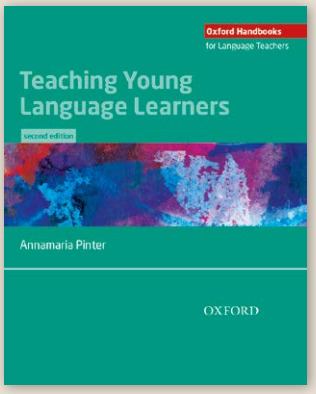
Rokita-Jaskow, J. (2025). *The ecology of pre-primary foreign language learning*. Multilingual Matters. www.multilingual-matters.com/page/detail/the-ecology-of-pre-primary-foreign-language-learning/?SF1=work_id&ST1=CVIEW-666fc7b8db568



Free to download from:
www.oup.com/elt/expert



ISBN: 978-0-19-420054-7
www.oup.com/elt



ISBN: 978-0-19-440318-4
www.oup.com/elt

Acknowledgements

Cover photograph reproduced with permission from: Getty Images/FatCamera

Illustrations by: Dominika Kowalska/Collaborate

The publisher would like to thank the following for permission to reproduce photographs: Getty Images (/BraunS, /kali9, /MIXA, /StockPlanets); Shutterstock (Adelina ART, afotostock, StockImageFactory.com, Yulia Gust).

Artificial intelligence (AI) transparency statement:

With the sheer number of AI tools for text generation and increased ease of use, the author has created the following AI transparency statement for this text. This text has not been generated or improved using AI. We hope that this transparency statement allows you to better understand the author's process and the way that AI has interacted with the development of this piece of writing. The author of this paper does not provide consent for this document to be used as part of a dataset for generative AI training purposes.

OXFORD

Endnotes

1 Robinson et al. (2015)
2 Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2023)

1 Why does English in pre-primary matter?

3 Murphy and Evangelou (2014)
4 Ellis (2014)
5 Read (2003)
6 Marinova-Todd et al. (2000)
7 Cortina-Pérez and Andúgar (2021)
8 Mourão and Ellis (2020); Early Education (2012)
9 Rämä-Ory (2022)
10 Van Avermart (2024)
11 García and Wei (2014)
12 Otto and Cortina-Pérez (2023)
13 Ragnarsdóttir (2020)
14 Mourão and Ellis (2020)

2 The challenges of introducing English in pre-primary

15 Murphy and Evangelou (2016)
16 Murphy and Evangelou (2016)
17 Resnick (2007)
18 Lau and Van Viegen (2020)
19 García and Otheguy (2019)
20 Read (2011)

3 Suggestions for a successful introduction

21 Mourão and Ellis (2020)
22 Lau and Van Viegen (2020)
23 Mourão and Robinson (2016)
24 Robinson et al. (2015)

References

Andúgar, A. & **Cortina-Pérez, B.** (2018). EFL teachers' reflections on their teaching practice in Spanish preschools: A focus on motivation. In M. Schwartz (Ed.), Preschool bilingual education: Agency in *Interactions between children, teachers, and parents*. Springer.

Cortina-Pérez, B. & **Andúgar, A.** (2021). Teaching EFL at Spanish preschools: A comparative analysis from two different teachers' perspectives. *Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning 11*(1), 30–52.

Early Education. (2012). *Development matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)*. UK Department for Education. dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/14042/7/development%20matters%20in%20the%20early%20years%20foundation%20stage__Redacted.pdf

Ellis, G. (2014). Young learners: Clarifying our terms. *ELT Journal Volume 68*(1), 75–78.

García, O. & **Otheguy, R.** (2019). Plurilingualism and translanguaging: commonalities and divergences. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(1), 17–35 doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2019.1598932

García, O. & **Wei, L.** (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Graham, P. (2009). *Susan Isaacs: A life freeing the minds of children*. Karnac. doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0297

Lau, S. M. & **Van Viegen, S.** (2020). Plurilingual pedagogies: An introduction. In: S. M. Lau & S. Van Viegen (Eds) *Plurilingual Pedagogies. Educational Linguistics* (Vol 42, pp. 3–22). Springer, Cham. link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-36983-5_1

Marinova-Todd, S. H., **Marshall, D. B.** & **Snow, C. E.** (2000). Three misconceptions about age and L2 learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 34(1), 9–34. doi.org/10.2307/3588095

Mourão, S. & **Ellis, G.** (2020). *Teaching English to pre-primary children. Educating very young children*. Delta Publishing.

Mourão, S. & **Robinson, P.** (2016). Facilitating the learning of English through collaborative practice. In V. Murphy & M. Evangelou (Eds), *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages* (pp. 253–264). British Council. www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/case-studies-insights-and-research/early-childhood-education-english-speakers-other

Murphy, V. & **Evangelou, M.** (2014). *Second language learning in early school years: Trends and contexts*. Oxford University Press.

Murphy, V. & **Evangelou, M.** (2016). *Early childhood education in English for speakers of other languages*. British Council.

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, 56*(4), 451–477. doi.org/10.1017/S0261444823000095

Otto, A. & **Cortina-Pérez, B.** (2023). *Handbook of CLIL in pre-primary education*. Springer Nature.

Ragnarsdóttir, H. (2020). Educational partnerships of teachers, parents, and children in multilingual preschool contexts. In M. Schwartz (Ed.), *Handbook of early language education*. Springer.

Rämä-Ory, P. (2022). *Language acquisition in early years of childhood: the role of family and pre-primary education* [Thematic report]. UNESCO.

Read, C. (2003). Is younger better? *English Teaching Professional, 28*, 5–7.

Read, C. (2011). Carol Read's ABC of teaching. *carolread.wordpress.com* carolread.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/y-is-for-young-learners/

Resnick, M. (2007). All I really need to know (about creative thinking) I learned (by studying how children learn) in kindergarten. In *Proceedings of the 6th ACM SIGCHI Conference on Creativity & Cognition* (pp. 1–6). ACM. dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/1254960.1254961

Robinson, P., **Mourão, S.** & **Kang, N. J.** (2015). *English learning areas in pre-primary classrooms: An investigation of their effectiveness.* British Council. www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/pub_English%20learning%20areas%20in%20pre-primary%20classrooms.pdf

Van Avermart, P. (2024). Multilingualism and language diversity for inclusion in education: Brief on inclusion in education. UNESCO. unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000389960

ELT Expert Panel

Oxford University Press

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the university's objective of excellence in research, scholarship and education by publishing worldwide.

ELT expert panel

The ELT Expert Panel is a group of leading researchers and practitioners in education who advise us on the key issues shaping language learning today. The discussion topics are informed through research as well as by listening to our global ELT community. Bringing together a wide range of insights, the Panel offers evidence-based recommendations to support teachers and learners in their future success.

ELT position papers

The ELT position papers are the result of consultation with members of the Panel, selected for their specialism and research expertise. With these papers, we offer guidance to the following readers:

- Teachers
- Teacher educators
- Head teachers
- Directors of Studies
- School owners
- Curriculum developers
- Policymakers
- Ministries of Education

For expert advice on the key issues shaping language education, download all our position papers at: www.oup.com/elt/expert

To cite this paper:

Hillyard, S. (author), Cortina-Pérez, B. (consultant), Faitaki, F. (consultant), Mourão, S. (consultant) (2025). *Pre-primary English: how to do it well* [PDF]. Oxford University Press. www.oup.com/elt/expert

OXFORD

The experts consulted for this paper

Sarah Hillyard

Sarah Hillyard holds a master's degree in Teaching English to Young Learners from the University of York. She has worked as a teacher, coordinator and ELT academic consultant at pre-primary level in bilingual schools in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She has also been a tutor on NILE's online course 'Teaching English in Pre-Primary Education' for many years now. Apart from delivering webinars and face-to-face talks at conferences, she is also an international freelance teacher trainer, writer of articles and blog posts, course developer and author of students' books and teacher's books for a range of courses based on pre-primary, primary CLIL, STEAM and general ELT.

Beatriz Cortina-Pérez

Dr Beatriz Cortina-Pérez is Associate Professor at the Department of Language and Literature Education at the University of Granada (Spain), where she teaches on the Early Childhood Education degree and various master's programmes. Her research focuses on pre-primary foreign language education and early plurilingualism—areas in which she has published and presented extensively. She is particularly interested in teacher education, multilingual pedagogies and the implementation of language policies in early childhood settings.

Faidra Faitaki

Dr Faidra Faitaki is a lecturer in Applied Linguistics at the Department of Education, University of Oxford. Her research explores the linguistic, cognitive and educational factors that underpin (pre)school-aged children's acquisition of English as an additional/foreign language. She is also interested in how children's second language knowledge can be improved through the arts. Faidra is currently engaged in designing and implementing a drama-based intervention aimed at developing young children's oral language and socioemotional skills.

Sandie Mourão

Sandie Mourão (PhD) is a senior research fellow at CETAPS, Nova University Lisbon, with over 35 years of experience in English Language Education as a teacher, teacher educator, educational consultant, author and researcher. She specializes in early language learning with children from nursery to upper primary, and investigates play in early years language education, picture books and reader response, intercultural awareness, classroom-based assessment practices and language teacher education.