



Reading and Writing in the Primary School EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The use of written language in the primary school English classroom has been subject to a long-standing debate among foreign language teachers as well as researchers. Arguments range from a fear of overtaxing young learners on the con side to the learners' desire and capability of coping with reading and writing on the pro side. Current research shows evidence towards young learners profiting from an early introduction to written English. This chapter outlines the history and current state of reading and writing in the primary school EFL classroom, including an insight into the arguments of the so-called debate on early biliteracy. The need for differentiated English teaching and cohesiveness in the primary-secondary school transition to successfully foster these competences is also discussed.

Keywords: reading, writing, differentiation, transition

1. Introduction

One of the manifold discourses within the field of primary school English language education in Germany has been about the degree to which written competences should be considered. At this point in time, reading and especially writing are – at a curricular level – generally considered as supplementary competences to listening and speaking. The primacy of oral language, that is listening and speaking, is a core characteristic of early language education (Elsner, 2010; Pinter, 2017). However, research conducted over the course of the last decade has shown considerable advantages of challenging younger learners to read and write in the foreign language, for example, to meet the learners' needs or to include a wide range of different tasks. To do so without overtaxing learners is not to rely on “incidental” acquisition, but to create an environment that

enables learners to consciously engage with written language, all while scaffolding and guiding the process. The following sections will first offer a brief definition of important terms, before giving a short overview of the so-called debate on early biliteracy with pro and con arguments for and respectively against an early introduction of reading and writing. This is followed by the current status of written competences in primary school English classrooms. In a next step, ways of differentiating and scaffolding reading and writing tasks will be discussed. An examination of the role that written language can play around the transition to secondary school will close this chapter.

2. About Early Reading and Writing in English

Reading is a complex competence that is mostly understood as reading comprehension. Reading comprehension means that the reader actively engages with a written piece of text in order to decode its content via complex processes of meaning making (Steck, 2009). These processes simultaneously take place at the level of words, sentences and larger units of text and involve the learners' mental lexicon, their previous knowledge (world and text knowledge) as well as the use of reading strategies (see Diehr & Frisch, 2010 and Reckermann, 2018 for details). However, other facets of reading, such as reading aloud, also belong to the competence of reading. Mindt and Schlüter (2007) differentiate between seven stages of reading in the primary school English classroom, ranging from reading single words on word cards to reading short sentences and culminating in reading a short text aloud. In all these stages, silent reading (for comprehension) precedes reading aloud. This allows a focus on reading comprehension before also challenging learners with speaking while reading.

As the productive equivalent to the receptive, yet certainly active, competence of reading, the acquisition of writing competences at primary level can be divided into a reproductive and a productive stage (Mindt & Schlüter, 2007). In the reproductive stages, students either copy given words, sentences and texts or follow oral dictation. Productive writing begins with writing based on a prompt – such as describing a picture – and concludes with independent writing, for example writing a letter.

Böttger (2013) takes a similar view, but further separates the stages prior to free productive writing into (1) learning to write and (re-)construct letters, (2) imitative writing, that is copying from examples, (3) reproductive writing, that is delayed copying such as filling gaps in a known text – and (4) semi-creative writing based on frameworks, that is finishing sentence fragments or reconstructing dialogues.

3. A Glimpse into the History of Early Biliteracy

Over the course of its introduction – starting with promising pilot projects in the late 1970s (Doyé & Lüttge, 1978) and culminating with each federal state offering a foreign language in primary school by 2006/07 (Börner, 2017; Lohmann, 2017; Schmid-Schönbein, 2008) – the primacy of oral language has been a clear and uncontested characteristic of early English language education. In the 1990s, as more concrete implementations of formalized early English (as well as French in some regions along the Rhine area) took place, working with written language slowly gained in importance but still remained a highly contested and discussed issue (Kubanek-German, 1999). The following two decades were shaped by a debate as well as empirical exploration of positive and negative aspects of introducing written competences in early English classes. The next paragraphs will briefly summarize the discourse that became known as the debate on early biliteracy (for an in-depth summary of these arguments see, for example, Reckermann, 2018, pp. 74-78).¹

One of the primary concerns leveled against early biliteracy was the fear of overtaxing younger learners. Teachers (and researchers) argued that the scant differences in grapheme-phoneme-correspondence between English and German were too complex for learners to understand simultaneously (Legutke et al., 2009). Hence, teachers as well as researchers often argued that reading and writing in the foreign language should only be introduced once a sufficient basis of L1 literacy has been

¹ The term ‘early biliteracy’ as used in this chapter refers to the explicit use of the written language – receptively as well as productively – in early English teaching while learners are still (more or less advanced in) learning to read and write in their L1/the school language (that is German in Germany).

formed (Piske, 2007). However, empirical findings, for instance provided by the EVENING-Study² (Paulick & Groot-Wilken, 2009), did not show any significant indication of young learners being overly taxed by being confronted with written English. On the contrary, learners participating in the EVENING-study outperformed their teachers' as well as the researchers' expectations and results on the learners' English reading and writing competences showed ceiling effects (meaning that test items were not challenging enough for participants and results thus were skewed towards being very positive) (Paulick & Groot-Wilken, 2009).

Rymarczyk and Musall (2010, p. 77) add that "neither early English nor early contact with the English written form has any detrimental effect on poor learners' achievements in German." This has been (and unfortunately partly still is) a matter of great concern: Developing both L1 (i.e., school language = German in Germany) and foreign language reading and writing competences at the same time can lead to negative effects on L1 literacy (Kierepka, 2010). Yet, at this point in time, there is no empirical evidence to prove this assumption right. Instead, studies in immersive English classrooms have shown that simultaneous literacy development in English and German is possible without (long-term) drawbacks in L1 literacy and L1 development (Steinlen, 2021; Wirbatz & Reckermann, 2020; Zaunbauer, 2007).

Another major concern was that the introduction of written elements into the primary school English classroom might lead to these elements superseding oral competences as the primary basis for assessment and school placement in the process of transitioning to secondary school (Bleyhl, 2007; Kierepka, 2010; Legutke et al., 2009). Whereas the other two concerns are related to language learning processes and have been successfully challenged by empirical research, this issue rather stems from the field of teaching practice. It is mirrored in publishers' (and teachers') suggestions for pen-and-paper tests to be used in primary school English classes, which are usually well suited to test reading and writing competences but often struggle to assess oral competences,

² Table 1 provides an overview of the EVENING- as well as the BIG-Study, both which are frequently referred to in this chapter.

particularly speaking. Yet, as outlined in the curriculum for English in North-Rhine Westphalia, for instance, oral competences are supposed to lay the basis for assessment while written competences are supposed to play a role, but a minor one (MSB NRW, 2021).

The most prominent argument for the inclusion of written language in early English teaching is the fact that young learners already increasingly come into contact with written English in their everyday lives (Zaunbauer, 2007). More so, they recognize written language as a part of language learning and are motivated to develop and practice their skills with it (Böttger, 2010; Diehr, 2010; Diehr & Rymarczyk, 2010). If left to their own devices, learners are likely to come up with their own ways of spelling English words, usually based on rules for writing in German, referred to as ‘invented spelling’ (Rymarczyk, 2008). This leads to **penzel* instead of *pencil*, **bateflei* instead of *butterfly* or **maus* instead of *mouse* (for further examples, see BIG-Kreis, 2015 or Rymarczyk, 2007). While mistakes are necessary steps in the acquisition of writing as well as reading competences, students can only move past these if they are introduced to examples of English writing early on (Schmid-Schönbein, 2001) and if a reflection of the differences in grapheme-phoneme correspondence between English and German as well as a more explicit introduction to reading and writing in English take place (Frisch, 2013).

Emerging from these discussions is the current consensus that the advantages of early biliteracy clearly outweigh the disadvantages, meaning that core questions do not revolve around “Why?” or “If?” any longer but instead ask for “How?”.

4. The Current State of Reading and Writing

As shown in the preceding section, written English has by now been established as a core part of early English teaching. It is generally agreed upon that encounters with the written language can be used to support the development of oral competences and also contribute to young learners’ motivation for language learning (Diehr & Rymarczyk, 2012; Legutke et al., 2009; Mindt & Schlüter, 2007). Additionally, in reviewing current research on early biliteracy, Beinke (2020) identifies that the

introduction of written language is beneficial for developing the following competence domains:

- written language
- language awareness
- autonomy and differentiation
- memory support

All these arguments are excelled by the fact that young learners want to learn how to read and write in English, explicitly ask for written language and will try to develop their own rules based on previous knowledge (e.g., invented spelling) which might eventually lead to a fossilization of mistakes (Diehr & Rymarczyk, 2012; Rymarczyk, 2008). In sum, this exemplifies that the current state of research and experience fundamentally supports the introduction of reading and writing in early English language classrooms.

However, some issues that have been noted by researchers since the advent of early English teaching and the inclusion of written skills still remain unsolved. The lack of national standards and expectations for primary school English in Germany has led to a “scattergun approach” (Diehr, 2010, p. 52), where curricula differ widely between federal states. Whereas Lohmann (2017) still optimistically noticed a national trend towards starting English education in first grade, recent changes, such as going back to starting in Year 3 in North-Rhine-Westphalia or Baden-Wuerttemberg, only contribute to the remarkable differences between states. These differences also become visible in comparing the different states’ curricular demands concerning written language, for instance those of Saxony (SfK FS, 2019) and North-Rhine Westphalia (MSB NRW, 2021). In terms of expectations towards writing, most states’ curricula refer to the A1 level of the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), while some set the bar lower (Lohmann, 2017).

In taking a step towards national standards, it is crucial to investigate the level of competence in reading and writing young learners can achieve by the end of primary school. Larger scale studies, such as the EVENING- (Groot-Wilken, 2009) and BIG-Study (BIG-Kreis, 2015), could show that learners by the end of Year 4 were able to competently read at a word and

sentence level (see Table 1 for a brief summary). These two studies used almost the same reading test and students' results also increased noticeably (BIG-Kreis, 2015). However, the utilized items proved less challenging than expected, leading to the already mentioned ceiling effects that indicate that students might have been capable of tackling more advanced tasks (BIG-Kreis, 2015; Paulick & Groot-Wilken, 2009).

Study		Research foci and tasks with regard to written competences	Selected findings	
EVENING-Study (Engel et al., 2009) Participants: approx. 3,000 primary school learners	Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tasks at word and sentence level • based on the CEFR and German primary EFL curricula 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Results correspond with and even partly exceed curricular demands. (pp. 194-195) • Researchers and teachers underestimated learners' competences; results show that tasks were too easy to complete and likely skewed the results (ceiling effect). (p. 189) 	
	Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • adapted instruments from the EVENING-Study • tasks at word and sentence level 	Learners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • very good student performance (p. 43) • ceiling effects (see EVENING-Study) still present (p. 43, 68) 	Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tended to underestimate learners' cognitive potential for literacy development (p. 28)
	Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • tasks at word and sentence level • based on the CEFR and BIG-Standards (2009) 	Learners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can write familiar words correctly / identifiably without templates (p. 48) • actively construct rules based on previous knowledge (p. 48) 	Teachers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use of writing is dependent on teachers' perception of English as a subject, as well as how competent they see themselves (p. 30)

Table 1: Overview of the EVENING- and BIG-Studies

Based on findings from the BIG-Study, the BIG-Kreis then reevaluated their 2005 proposal for national standards in 2017, concluding that learners' cognitive potential with regards to reading and writing is underutilized (Börner et al., 2017).

Whereas there is still a need for more research at the level of writing competences that young learners can achieve, there has been a research focus on reading competences in recent years. Concerning reading at text level, studies such as those conducted by Frisch (2013), Kolb (2013) and Reckermann (2018) show promising results. In all these explorative studies, utilizing a guided and scaffolded approach led to students being able to read and understand (authentic) children's books in English. For instance, Frisch (2017), based on such findings, concludes that not only reading at word and sentence level but also reading at text level can and should be used in early English teaching.

Given the current understanding of the value of reading in early English education, the assumptions made regarding the feasibility of fostering writing early are far from unreasonable. While there is as of now little concrete empirical data to support this, the study conducted by Schrader (2021) provides promising initial results. More so, arguments that consider learners' motivation and desire to use written language communicatively at an early level are well-noted and by now also realized in some primary school curricula, e.g., in North-Rhine Westphalia (Windmüller-Jesse, 2021).

Besides the lack of national standards, another issue in teaching written English competences at primary level is that of language teacher education. Research shows that well-trained primary English teachers are one of the main factors for the success of early English education (Porsch & Wilden, 2020). Yet, as shown in the BIG-Study (BIG-Kreis, 2015), teachers who believe themselves to be competent language users also place a higher emphasis on written competences in English than teachers without a university education in teaching English. Young learners of English thus need well-trained teachers of English for them to competently and regularly include written competences in the English classes. As has already been mentioned, leaving learners to figure out

English reading and writing on their own can lead to undesirable effects such as invented spelling or pronunciation, including a danger of fossilization. It clearly is the English teachers' task to raise awareness of the differences between reading and writing in English vs. German and to introduce learners to meaningful reading and writing tasks.

5. Using Challenging Reading and Writing Tasks with Young Learners

Given the previously discussed ceiling effects present in both the BIG- and EVENING-Studies, it is reasonable that young learners' potential for reading and writing is underestimated. Indeed, young learners are able to read and write at word and sentence level without much issue. As illustrated by promising results such as those provided by Frisch (2013), Kolb (2013), Reckermann (2018) and Schrader (2021), young learners are willing and able to both read and write at a level beyond what is currently practiced in most early English classrooms. Taking a look at reading activities used in primary school English classrooms, Kolb (2013) finds that reading activities are mainly constrained to the area of understanding short written task instructions. This observation is supported by the BIG-Study (BIG-Kreis, 2015), which found that teachers rarely use longer coherent texts and instead stick to single words and short sentences. Following these arguments, Reckermann (2018, p. 181) arrives at the conclusion that "learners need challenging but manageable [reading and writing] tasks in order to be able to develop their full potential and advance in their process of acquiring skills and competences."

In recent years, primary school English coursebooks have started introducing more and more written language through, e.g., instructions, picture stories and reading texts. However, such as they are, these written elements are rarely designed towards deliberately fostering reading (and writing) competences, but instead rely on incidental acquisition (Frisch, 2019). The underlying assumption that "primary school children will effortlessly and independently develop the ability to read English writing" (Diehr, 2010, p. 52) is an issue in this context. The same is to be observed for writing competences. To counterbalance this issue, publications such as articles in *Grundschule Englisch* (e.g., issues 68 and 72) or the *Fit for Five-books* now available for most primary school English coursebooks

have started to introduce and publish materials specifically designed for fostering reading and writing competences. Differentiated workbooks as published alongside several coursebooks have also started to include more challenging reading and writing tasks. Yet, while the introduction of such rather optional teaching materials is to be welcomed, reading and writing are fundamental elements of early language teaching and need to be taught to all learners and not as an optional addition to some.

A key to the early and yet successful acquisition of reading and writing competences is to base the teaching thereof on the learners' individual needs and competences, meaning that differentiated and individualized teaching is required. Differentiation is a core demand of any classroom, yet of particular importance in primary school English classrooms, as language learning is a highly individual process (Böttger, 2012). While many teachers already make use of group/partner work, peer teaching, scaffolding, interest-based content, and additional tasks for quicker learners, they seem to not always do this as a deliberate method of differentiation (Böttger, 2012). As the basis for individualized and differentiated early English teaching, Böttger (2012) as well as Reckermann (2017, 2019) call for opening up the classroom and transferring some control of their own learning to the students themselves. This, however, does not mean the absence of support structures and scaffolds. Instead, careful means of support need to be provided that allow each learner to profit from the given task to the best possible extent. Supportive means are planned and guided by the teacher and include, for instance, the preparation of tip cards, the provision of additional resources (e.g., dictionaries), the provision of words and structures needed for the task, as well as designing a learning environment that encourages peer support through cooperative reading and writing activities (see, e.g., Reckermann, 2017 for more concrete suggestions). Similarly, such tasks should also not disregard the previously mentioned progression of reading and writing competences from word-, to sentence- to text level as well as from reception to production.

Reckermann (2017) offers nine characteristics of open tasks for young learners, some of which are also applicable to good English teaching in

general. These mainly concern the use of relevant and interesting materials and/or topics, a focus on meaning, the provision of a solid and manifold supportive system, as well as working with students' previous knowledge. Another core feature is to give the learners as much choice at as many levels as possible.

Examples of such challenging and somewhat open tasks include the creation of posters on which students can, for example, present their favorite football player (Lauströer, 2013). By using authentic and relevant topics, such tasks make use of young learners' motivation to use the target language. Given the amount of autonomy needed to approach such tasks, the use of written language is essential (Elsner, 2017). This way, learners can choose their own reading material or make a more informed choice about which kinds of supportive devices they require (Reckermann, 2018). In the example of presenting a favorite football player, learners can decide freely whether they want to copy single words or chunks from prepared material, or use the English language more productively in forming their own sentences. Such tasks can also be scaffolded by the opportunity to research one's topic on the internet, as well as the use of dictionaries, example texts and word/phrase cards at a so-called helping point (Lauströer, 2013).

While creating a poster is rather concerned with supporting learners' writing competences in English, there are also proposals for more challenging reading tasks, for instance reading authentic English picture books. As shown by both Kolb (2013) and Reckermann (2018), young learners can independently read authentic picture books, given that they are provided with support and given that the teachers' expectations towards the learners' level of reading comprehension are realistic. In working with picture books, it is well-worth mentioning that digital, app-based realizations of such books offer further possibilities for differentiation and individualization (Scheeren, 2019). Such picture book apps also bear great potential for learners' (initial) motivation and can take away the hurdle of approaching a whole text in English, which can be very valuable particularly for beginner and/or weaker readers (Reckermann, 2020).

6. Transition to Secondary School

Another major point that is continuously discussed with regard to written competences in early foreign language teaching is the considerable impact on the primary-secondary school transition (see also Bastkowski in this volume). The limited success of experimental early English classes in Germany in the 1970s and 80s is attributed in part to the inability of secondary school education to continue where primary education had left off (Böttger, 2010). Unfortunately, teachers and researchers are still facing this issue more than 40 years later (Porsch & Wilden, 2020). As, for instance, investigated by the BIG-Kreis, a major complaint brought forth by secondary school teachers concerns students' lack of experience with English writing at the point of transition (BIG-Kreis, 2009). This is but one example of teachers on both sides of the transition process being unaware of teaching approaches, standards, and priorities of the respective "other side" (Dausend, 2017). The PEAK1-Project (Kolb & Legutke, 2019) investigated the consequences of primary to secondary school transition in a setting that was also marked by cooperation and dialogue between both schools. The student and teacher interviews which were conducted in that study, focusing on the transition phase, showed that learners especially regarded their experiences with written English as useful when moving from Year 4 to Year 5 and generally experienced the process as relatively smooth (Brunsmeier, 2019a). While the observations made by secondary school teachers still marked that students' writing competences were deficient in comparison to listening, speaking, and reading, teachers were also able to attribute this to the primacy of oracy in the primary school English classroom (Brunsmeier, 2019b). Results such as these show that a targeted use of written English in the primary English classroom can be conducive to a successful primary to secondary school transition. Yet, primary school English teaching is not supposed to adjust to secondary school teachers' needs and complaints, but primary school English teachers must stick to the (well-grounded) requirements and methodologies of early language teaching. Still, an implementation of (more challenging) reading and writing tasks at primary school level is on the one hand compliant with curricular demands, learners' competences and needs as well as a holistic methodology of teaching English to (young) learners. Yet, on the other hand, it can serve to ease the transition to

secondary school: killing two birds with one stone. An increased focus on reading and writing is also mirrored, for instance, in the new primary school English curriculum in NRW, which was among other aspects designed towards strengthening the continuity of English education through all stages of education and henceforth acknowledges the communicative purpose of reading and writing in addition to them “just” being a useful scaffold (Windmüller-Jesse, 2021).

7. Conclusion and Outlook

As already stated, there is currently little doubt that reading and writing are core parts of the early English classroom. Whereas early debates focused on the question of whether English reading and writing should be included at all, recent discourse has moved on towards developing and exploring the “How?” of teaching these competences. There is a consensus on the primacy of oracy in the early English classroom that stands uncontested in all research studies, in publications that focus on teaching practice and in formal/political documents. The usage of written English does not and should not detract from this focus. Instead, it answers students’ needs to explore the foreign language writing system and to be foreign language readers and writers themselves. In such explorations, they encounter differences in writing systems and learn to navigate these supported by their teachers as well as carefully selected teaching materials. Teachers using challenging, differentiated, and well-scaffolded tasks can challenge their learners with interesting and relevant reading and writing activities that can be approached at different levels. Somewhat as icing on the cake, such an approach can also ease the debated transition to secondary school level. However, quite a few aspects remain up to future empirical investigation as well as political action, among them the crucial need for national standards for teaching English at primary level and a larger empirical basis as to how challenging as well as differentiated reading and writing activities can be implemented in primary English classrooms.

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