

Early Foreign Language Learning - Challenges in Materials Design for Young Learners

Maria Stec

University of Silesia, Poland

0191

The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

The paper will focus on teaching and learning materials used in early foreign language learning. The aim is to identify the most important factors in syllabus and course book design. The idea is to find answers to two questions: What are the latest tendencies in materials design for young learners? What is the nature of culture content included in materials for young learners? The project involves an analysis of twelve syllabuses and fifteen course books currently used in teaching English to children. The data were collected during the review studies for Polish Ministry of Education and based on a checklist. It is hoped that the results from the research project will bring implications for early foreign language learning and enrich the process of materials design for young learners.

Key words: early foreign language learning, young learners, materials design, culture content

In literature, the term young learners may refer to three groups of children. Firstly, the children in kindergartens, who are between 2 and 5 years old and called very young learners (VYL). Secondly, it may relate to the children, whose age ranges between 6 and 8 in the first stage of schooling when early language learning is introduced in Europe. They are young learners (YL) in 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades, who become sensitized to a foreign language (FL) and experience it through play-like activities. Thirdly, the term may refer to older young learners (OYL), who are in 4th, 5th and 6th grades, and experience more systematic FL teaching in primary school.

Nevertheless, learning languages involves psychological, linguistic and cultural changes in children's minds. Early foreign language learning (EFL) is very popular in Europe due to its positive effect on children's language and personal skills, positive attitudes to other languages and cultures (cf. Brewster, Ellis and Girard, 2002:5, 54). The priorities accepted include: early start of learning languages and life-long language education. The idea is to give recognition to the needs of YL and promote intercultural experience. EFL¹ is widely promoted and supported by 73% of the EU population, who claim that the knowledge of languages helps in the professional career. The common policy is to teach 2 (or more languages) in schools. For all learners in Europe, having the command of more than one FL becomes an increasingly important factor². For this reason, both the Council of Europe and the European Union encourage all citizens to be multilingual; specifically to be able to speak 2 foreign languages (the first one for international communication, and the second, the language of the neighbouring country) (cf. Komorowska, 2010:54-58).

The idea is to develop inter-cultural communicative competence (ICC) to prepare YL for encounters with others. ICC embraces linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence plus five inter-cultural components such as positive attitudes, knowledge about culture, skills of interpreting and relating, skills of discovery/interaction, political education and critical cultural awareness (cf. Byram after Sobkowiak, 2008:47-57). The aim is to develop specific meta-cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity, awareness of own cultural identity, develop empathy and tolerance, curiosity and critical thinking (cf. Sobkowiak, 2008:53-54). YL learn simultaneously a FL, socio-cultural competence and ICC. These skills help them with the linguistic and pragmatic behaviour during communicative interactions.

¹ EFL in Europe faces challenges grouped in the six following dichotomies (cf. Doyé, 1999:123-124):

- a) Integration of a FL vs. a separate subject: relates to the position of a FL in the curriculum, following the holistic approach or gradual embedding.
- b) Systematic courses vs. occasional teaching: relates to the organization of a FL teaching process.
- c) Language learning vs. language/cultural awareness: refers to the development of the language skills and the function of intercultural communicative competence (ICC).
- d) FL in the core curriculum vs. an optional activity: relates the role of a FL in the curriculum as a major part of primary education or an extra activity.
- e) Class teacher vs. subject teacher: relates to the qualifications, experience and role of a FL teacher as an expert with the appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes to YL.
- f) Communicative competence vs. sensitization of YL for languages: relates to the aims of EFL and its continuity in further education.

² There are 23 official (national) languages recognized in the EU in addition to regional and minority languages. The national languages of the EU are the working languages used for drafting regulations of general application.

Moreover, YL learn languages and culture from educational materials, which promote both visible and invisible aspects of culture. The visible aspects are easy to explain and clear to all learners for example traditions and customs such as cuisine or Christmas. The invisible aspects of culture refer to value systems, beliefs and socio-cultural norms that are difficult to explain and usually are not examined intellectually in a FL classroom (cf. Hinkel, 2001:443-458, Kramsch, 2002:201-206). In this paper the term materials involves syllabuses and course books produced by publishers and accepted by Polish Ministry of Education. Although materials are criticised for inappropriate cultural realities and not reflecting the latest research into language acquisition, still they constitute the basic resources and provide support for both teachers and learners (cf. Tomlinson, 2013:15-18, McGrath, 2013:5-17).

The educational materials “mirror” cultural values and transfer cultural content in more or less considerable degree, influencing learners’ perceptions and attitudes towards the target language nation and culture (cf. Krawiec, 2012:105-116). In particular, content (and the degree of culture content) in materials has an impact on YL’ holistic development (cognitive, individual, social and emotional spheres). It may influence the amount of a FL they will remember (the input interesting for them); their behaviour, relationships and interactions; their mental development (challenging tasks); their motivation (interesting tasks); thinking about themselves (positive experience); perception about themselves (picture of themselves) (cf. Gerngross and Puchta, 2000:12-13). The tendency is to follow four objectives in material design for intercultural language education. Namely, authors include content which develops knowledge of self and others, awareness of self and others, attitudes, skills of exploring, interpreting and interacting (cf. Byram and Masuhara, 2013:150-154). Inter-cultural teaching rather than only British studies are promoted, which is compared in the table below (cf. Bolt, 2001:101).

British studies	Intercultural teaching
Knowledge-based	Experiential (awareness, skills)
Focus: target culture	Focus: target and learner’s native culture
Outcome: target culture, native speaker	Outcome: variety of cultural outcomes
Teacher-centred	Learner-centred (autonomy)
Culture-dependant	Generic (transferable)
Monolithic, national picture of culture	Heterogeneous picture of culture
Textbook-based	Centred on original resources
Goal: knowledge	Goal: skills, attitudes, knowledge

Tab.1. Aspects of British culture and intercultural teaching.

Intercultural language teaching links 2 culture systems: YL’ native culture and the target language culture, which may be developed in a FL classroom. The process may lead to the progress in skills of observation, empathy for others, adaptation skills in intercultural situations and fostering of YL’ cultural identity (cf. Marczak, 2012:15-16).

Furthermore, visual component in the educational materials is the essential element which transmits cultural meanings and values. The component may serve 2 roles. Firstly, it is the supporting item to the linguistic component. Secondly, it is the stimulator for a discussion about culture. Wright states that visual materials are very important in delivering details about culture. He identified eight categories of pictures that are included in teaching and learning materials for YL such as: pictures of objects

(food, clothes, animals), people (stars and celebrities), people in action (everyday activities, travel), places (views), history (costumes), news, maps and other symbols (cf. Lugossy, 2007:77-89, Wright after Krawiec, 2012:112). The quality and amount of pictures provided in course books for YL may be another area of research.

1. Research purpose

The research purpose is to investigate the factors important in the design of teaching and learning materials for YL. In particular, it is to describe the latest tendencies in content with a focus on culture content included in syllabuses and course books used in EFLL.

2. Research questions

The idea is to find answers to the following questions:

- a) What are the latest tendencies in materials design for young learners?
- b) What is the nature of culture content included in materials for young learners?

3. Research procedure

The project involves an analysis of English syllabuses and course books for YL. It is based on the data obtained during the evaluation and review studies for Polish Ministry of Education. The instrument entitled: *Syllabus and course book evaluation: a global checklist* is composed of 10 sets of questions. The checklist includes the following groups of questions:

1. Questions about *rationale* relate to the purpose of the materials indicated, the level of EFLL.
2. Questions about *assumptions* relate to the educational theories and pedagogical concepts stated in the materials.
3. Questions about *context and user definition* relate to the description of the target group such as the degree of knowledge and skills assumed of YL.
4. Questions about *objectives and scope* relate to the description of the general learning, the detailed objectives and extra objectives.
5. Questions about *content and coverage* relate to the teaching content and topics included in the materials with a focus on culture content.
6. Questions about *practicality* relate to procedures, methods, techniques and tasks indicated for the materials implementation.
7. Questions about *illustration* relate to the visual presentation of the content (illustrations, diagrams, tables and drawings) and its nature.
8. Questions about *culture education* relate to the culture advocated (issues of origin, age, class, values, relations, customs and gender patterns, which may be considered as a hidden curriculum).
9. Questions about *standard requirements and assessment* relate to the procedures for the assessment of learners' progress.
10. Questions about *appropriateness* relate to the teaching materials designed, the amount and relevance to methodology of teaching a FL; the relation between the recommended teaching materials and the conceptual level of YL.

4.1 Sample selection:

The evaluation is initiated by syllabus and course book sample selection. The materials selected had to fulfil two criteria: practical consideration (materials should be designed for YL) and up-to-date methodology (cf. Williams, 1983:251-255). For the purpose of the investigation 12 syllabuses are selected and coded respectively: 2 for VYL, 5 for YL, 5 for OYL. There are also 15 course books selected and coded respectively: 5 for VYL, 5 for YL, 5 for OYL. The process requires a precise identification of feedback and analysis of data. The results from the evaluation are recorded and compiled on charts. The final step is to compare the answers collected in these two stages.

5. Interpretation of the results

The results³ indicate that materials development for EFL may be compared to ESP syllabus/course book design. Namely, materials for YL form a multidimensional framework and include the following categories:

1. Educational goals (key competencies): listed in the syllabus for YL focusing on the most essential schooling skills and abilities.
2. Teaching goals (educational goals): listed as learning strategies and non-linguistic skills including ICC, development of a positive attitude to other languages and cultures.
3. Teaching objectives: listed as linguistic skills to be learnt by YL and can be defined in operational forms (compare with Bloom's taxonomy).
4. Selection of topics and situations: the most interesting topics are listed under the headings of: *Family and Relatives, Games and Toys, Animals and Pets, Food and Drinks, Home, Health and Parts of the Body, Clothes, Shops and Money, Sports and Hobbies, School, Friends, Jobs and Skills, Everyday Objects, Time/Days/Months/Season, Weather and Everyday Plans, Places and Buildings, Holidays and Traditions, Countries, Nationalities and Travelling, Means of Communication, Directions and Means of Transport, Feelings and Opinion, Literature for YL – Fairy Tales.*
5. Selection of vocabulary (pronunciation): listed as words and phrases to describe the world of YL and associated with the topics and situations interesting for YL.
6. Selection of functions: listed as the basic communicative functions needed for dialogues, for example to greet, say goodbye, identify and present people/places/time, describe skills and abilities, describe behaviour and give orders.
7. Selection of grammatical categories: listed as structures and grammatical patterns that are recommended for comprehension at this level of EFL, for example countable/uncountable nouns, determiners and pronouns, question forms, prepositions of place/time and space, adjectives and adverbs, conjunctions, imperatives, present/future/past forms of tenses and modal verbs.
8. Selection of methods, procedures and techniques: appropriate practical procedures for teaching and learning in a FL primary classroom.
9. Teaching outcomes: receptive, productive, interaction and mediation skills plus a set of "learning to learn" skills desired after each stage of EFL.
10. Forms and criteria for assessment: forms and criteria of global and continuous assessment of YL' progress.

³ For the purpose of this article a part of the most relevant results is discussed.

Moreover, a model of topics have been identified in the investigated materials and presented in a table number 2 below:

I and ...		
My family	My school	My country
My home	My background	Other countries
My toys	My city/village	

Tab.2. Topics in materials for children.

The general tendency is to introduce initially the topics linked with the nearest background of YL. For example these are topics linked with family and school, and only later topics related both to “home” – *My country* – and the target language culture – *Other countries*. The detailed aspects of teaching culture and development of ICC in the materials for YL are presented in a table number 3 below:

Course book	Home (Polish) Culture	FL (Anglo-Saxon) culture
Course books for VYL	Merry Christmas Happy Easter My family	<u>Halloween</u> Christmas Easter My family (Mother’s day)
Course books for YL	Birthday Christmas Easter Happy New Year	Birthday <u>Halloween</u> Bonfire’s Night Christmas New Year’s Eve Valentine’s day Easter <u>Mother’s day</u> <u>English fairy-tales</u> <u>Lets’ travel</u>
Course books for OYL	<u>Snapshot of my country:</u> fact file, population, languages, cities, capital city <u>Information about Europe:</u> capital cities, languages, famous people of science, celebrities and stars, climate, wildlife, places to visit	<u>Information about the UK:</u> famous Britons (Shakespeare), holidays, geography (Scotland, Wales, England), birthday, meal times, sport, history, music. <u>Information about the USA:</u> holidays (Thanksgiving, Independence day), geography, climate, capital city, people, entertainment, sport, music. <u>Information about</u> <u>Australia/Canada:</u> geography, climate, capital cities, places to visit, people, entertainment, sport.

Tab.3. Development of ICC in the selected English course books for YL

The list of items in all the selected books indicate a dominating presence of Anglo-Saxon culture aspects. The materials for VYL and YL share three standard cultural

items, which can be simultaneously related to home and target language culture, such as Christmas, Easter and personal elements linked with the family and birthday. However, YL learn also about Halloween, Valentine's day, Mother's day and English fairy-tales mainly in the English culture context, which may differ from the Polish viewpoint on the matters. The universal elements of travelling are introduced at this stage as well.

Still, the materials designed for OYL, for the second stage of EFLL in primary school incorporate more complex aspects of English culture. Namely, there are details not only about the UK, the USA but also about Canada and Australia. The common tendency is to introduce details about people, places, sport, music, geography, history and holidays in a wider perspective. As the results show, the similar pattern of cultural items is offered in the presentation of the Polish, European and international cultures. Then, the Polish studies and inter-cultural teaching are more balanced in the materials for the second part of primary education.

Nevertheless, the materials for VYL, YL and OYL share similar lexical items associated with development of ICC. The most common lexical groups include such items as names of countries and nations, friends from other countries, holidays, customs and celebrations in other countries, towns in Poland and other countries, animals in other countries. The most common communicative functions linked with ICC and advocated in syllabuses for YL are: writing Christmas and Easter postcards, Birthday cards, describing peers from other countries, their games and interests, countries and nationalities, holidays and customs, towns and places. The tendency is to introduce between six and ten new lexical items per each celebration or holiday in EFLL.

4. Conclusions

Materials design in EFLL should be planned at the level of holistic child development and at the level of teaching a FL to YL. The holistic child development refers to the first/second language acquisition, physical/biological development, mental/emotional development plus individual/social development of YL, whose profile can be described earlier. The process of teaching a FL should be based on the course design approach to meet the needs of the particular group of YL and teachers.

Teaching and learning materials (in their iconographic and textual form) influence YL and spread cultural meanings in the educational environment, stressing the connection between language learning and culture learning. Teachers should avoid forming a taxonomy of differences between familiar and "exotic" culture, remembering that misinterpretations of culture may reinforce stereotypes. The best idea is to apply properly cultural aspects and adjust them to the teaching situation as it involves the interplay between personal and social factors. Culture is always linked with gender, education, age, nation and interest, which are included in materials with different manifestation. The challenge is to find a balance approach, to use generalization on the one hand and individualisation on the other. The essential point is to remember that what is true of the whole is not necessarily true of the parts while the classroom interaction is always at the level of individuals and generalizations are unsuited for a FL primary classroom (cf. Guest, 2002:156-161, Vickov, 2007:105-119).

Culture content and its degree in the materials for YL vary. Then, at the stage of EFLL, the most appropriate are the materials which incorporate the basic information about both home and target language culture. They can support easily the development of ICC among YL. Moreover, teachers (parents) should be aware of “hidden curricula” in the materials for YL, which taught various attitudes to home and other traditions. Teachers should be aware of their role and the role of materials in the development of ICC. The aim is to foster YL’ home culture and familiarize them with other cultures. It can be achieved gradually following the systematic introduction of aspects in a FL classroom such as:

1. Aspects of Home Culture.
2. Aspects of Anglo-Saxon Culture.
3. Aspects of European Culture.
4. Aspect of the World – International Culture.

Bibliography

1. Blondin, C., Candelier, M., Edelbos, P., Johnstone, K., Kubanek-German, A., Taeschner, T. (2004). *Foreign languages in primary and pre-school education: context and outcomes*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, ECML, www.ec.europa.eu/education/languages/archive/key/foreignen.html.
2. Bolt, R. (2000). The foreign language classroom, culture and British studies – reflections and suggestions. In: M. Houten, A. Pulverness (Eds.), *New directions, new opportunities* (pp. 95-113). Kraków: The British Council.
3. Brewster, J., Ellis, G., Girard, G. (2002). *The primary English teacher's guide*. Harlow: Penguin English Guide.
4. Byram, M., Masuhara, H. (2013). Intercultural competence. In: B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Applied linguistics and materials development* (pp. 143-160). London: Bloomsbury.
5. Gerngross, G., Puchta, H. (2000). Język obcy w szkole podstawowej. Wpływ treści podręcznika na rozwój dziecka. In CODN (Eds.), *Języki Obce w Szkole*, 6, (pp. 11-15). Warszawa: CODN.
6. Guest, M. (2002). A critical “check-book” for culture teaching and learning. *ELT Journal*, 56 (2), 154-161.
7. Hinkel, E. (2001). Building awareness and practical skills to facilitate cross-curriculum communication. In: M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (pp. 443-458). Boston: Heinle and Heinle, the Thomson Learning.
8. Kramsch, C. (2002). Intercultural communication. In: R. Carter, D. Nunan (Eds.), *The Cambridge guide to teaching English to speakers of other languages* (pp. 201-206). Cambridge: CUP.
9. Komorowska, H. (2010). Content and language integrated learning. In: H. Komorowska, L. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich (Eds.), *Coping with diversity: language and culture education* (pp. 54-77). Warszawa: SWPS Academica.
10. Krawiec, M. (2012). Foreign language textbook as a carrier of cultural values and meanings. In: Z. Waśnik, M. Post (Eds.), *Papers and studies in axiological linguistics*, 7 (pp.105-116). Wrocław: WSF.
11. Lugossy, R. (2007). Authentic picture books in the lives of EFL young learners and their teachers. In: M. Nikolov, J. Mihaljevic-Djigunovic, M. Mattheoudakis,

- G. Lunberg, T. Flanagan, (Eds.), *Teaching modern languages to young learners* (pp. 77-89). Graz: ECML, Council of Europe.
12. Marczak, M. *New Trends in Teaching Language and Culture*. In: H. Komorowska, L. Aleksandrowicz-Pędich (eds.) *Coping with Diversity: Language and Culture Education*. SWPS Academica: Warszawa. pp.13-28.
 13. McGrath, I. (2013). *Teaching materials and the roles of EFL/ESL teachers*. London: Bloomsbury.
 14. Sobkowiak, P. (2008). How to develop students' inter-cultural competence in the classroom? *The Teacher*, 11 (63), 48-57.
 15. Tomlinson, B. (2013). Second language acquisition and materials development. In: B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Applied linguistics and materials development* (pp. 11-30). London: Bloomsbury.
 16. Vickov, G. (2007). Learners' own cultural identity in early language learning. In: M. Nikolov, J. Mihaljevic-Djigunovic, M. Mattheoudakis, G. Lunberg, T. Flanagan, (Eds.), *Teaching modern languages to young learners* (pp. 105-119). Graz: ECML, Council of Europe.
 17. Williams, D. (1983). Developing criteria for textbook evaluation. *ELT Journal*, 37 (3), 251-255.

The logo for 'iafor' is centered on the page. It consists of the lowercase letters 'iafor' in a light blue, sans-serif font. The logo is partially enclosed by a large, light blue circular arc that starts from the bottom left and curves towards the right. A smaller, light red circular arc is positioned above the 'iafor' text, partially overlapping the blue arc.

