

Editors' Introduction

MEXTESOL Journal Special Issue on Teaching English to Younger Learners

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The themes for special issues of the *Mextesol Journal* are chosen because the editorial board feels they are "hot topics" in our field. We proposed the topic of teaching English to younger learners because we perceived that although the profession in Mexico has generally focused on *secundaria* and above, there is a growing interest in teaching English as a foreign language to children. This interest of course corresponds to the expansion of English programs in *primaria* grades and even early childhood. This expansion of the focus and efforts of TESOL educators is happening both in private and now increasingly in public schools as well (see the Mextesol special issue edited by Smith, 2003). All evidence indicates that the trend towards introducing more English classes in lower grades will continue and continue to expand. There is a general assumption that if we start teaching English earlier, it will automatically produce better results. However, as Cameron (2003) cautions us, the expansion of EFL to younger learners creates special challenges in terms of how we as teachers must combine English teaching with children's literacy development, how to assess their learning, and how to develop teaching strategies specific for youngsters' learning styles. In addition, we need to reflect about how we can teach this language in a critical, local manner that promotes all of the languages (Spanish and Indigenous) and cultures present in Mexico. As language educators, we need to respond to these challenges by focusing our scholarly efforts on meeting the needs of teachers and students to generate theories, methods, materials, curricula and policies, and professional discussions around how to best teach English to young children in our Mexican context. The papers presented in this issue are the authors' contributions to this effort, and once again demonstrates that there is a vibrant, productive community of scholars working to meet Mexico's needs for quality English language teaching.

As Ruth Ban poignantly illustrates with her narrative piece in this issue, ELT in Mexico has undergone a process of professionalization built on an enormous amount of hard work from dedicated teachers. We want to thank everyone who has been involved in writing, reviewing, and supporting the development of this issue; the list of reviewers for this issue is listed below. The response we received to our Call for Papers for this special issue confirmed our suspicion that this is a timely and relevant topic. We received many excellent manuscripts covering a range of topics related to the theme of the issue from both local and international educators; some from well-established scholars, and others from first-time authors and contributors. In choosing the articles to include here, we have sought to balance between those with a practical, classroom-based focus, and those which deal with theories and research.

The first part of this issue includes three research papers. All examine classrooms where children are learning English. However, each takes a different orientation. Clemente, Dantas-Whitney, and Higgins examine the affective and sociocultural side of children learning English. They use ethnography to look at how children from working-class backgrounds in the city of Oaxaca use English as a site for expressing a wide range of emotions and interactions. Mercáu's article presents an empirical study on children's development of oral skills, and focuses specifically on their acquisition of yes/no questions. Hearn and Sams provide an overview of a public English language acquisition program (grades K-2) in the U.S. Through the use of vignettes, they illustrate strategies to develop English literacy and emphasize that the creation of a positive, active, and engaging learning community is essential when working with youngsters.

The second part includes articles that address the questions of curricula, policies, and materials for teaching English to children. The first two articles offer a historical perspective. Tapia Carlín reminds us that although we think of ELT as a recent phenomenon in Mexico, in fact it has a longer history than we might suspect. She describes a bilingual education initiative in Puebla dating back to the 1930s. Ban gives us a more contemporary perspective: Her historical perspective goes back 15 years as she recounts a volunteer project in Aguascalientes that became the official state *Inglés en Primarias* program. Next, López Gopar and coauthors evaluate *Enciclomedia*, the computer-based program for teaching English to children. They offer a critical perspective that critiques and questions many of the assumptions built into the program. Moore and Sayer give an overview of models of sheltered instruction, a popular method for teaching L2 English to children in the U.S. and elsewhere. They consider the relevance and potential of adopting and adapting this method for ELT in Mexico. Finally, de Mejía gives a comparative perspective, and explains how English teaching at the elementary level has been implemented in Colombia. Her account offers many parallels for the efforts in Mexico.

In the final section, there are several shorter articles that focus on classroom practice. From Slovenia, Pislar describes a fun and motivating unit that she has designed for kindergarten-aged children around the book *Little Red Riding Hood*, incorporating puppets, songs and many excellent dynamics for youngsters. González García gives us an excellent explanation of how to design a "WebQuest" for our students: A series of internet based activities around a particular theme or topic. Torres Soriano addresses the difficult topic of assessing younger learners, and explains how to use portfolios as a way to assess children's language development over time, rather than in a single moment. Lastly, Farley presents "readers' theatre," a classroom activity that brings reading and literature to life. We hope that this collection will stimulate your thinking and give you ideas for your classroom.

References:

- Cameron, L. (2003). Challenges in ELT from the expansion in teaching children. *ELT Journal*, 57(2): 105-112.
- Smith, P. (2003). An introduction to bilingualism and bilingual education in Mexico. *MEXTESOL Journal Special Issue: Bilingualism and Bilingual Education in Mexico*, 26(3): 9-12.