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EFFECTIVE PRACTICES IN PRIMARY ENGLISH LANGUAGE

EDUCATION: A RESEARCH BASED OVERVIEW

Abstract: *this article synthesizes effective practices for teaching English to young learners (ages 5–12): Total Physical Response (TPR), storytelling, CLIL, digital tools, affective support, and assessment. Young children have concrete thinking, short attention spans (15–20 minutes), and emotions – especially enjoyment – as the strongest predictor of engagement and proficiency. TPR boosts vocabulary retention through movement. CLIL (teaching subjects through English) enhances linguistic competence. AI tools provide pronunciation feedback but require teacher training and ethical guidelines. Enjoyment directly improves achievement, not just engagement. Assessment should be low-stakes, formative, and multimodal. The key finding: enjoyment is not a “nice to have” but a core pedagogical necessity.*

Keywords: *teaching English to young learners, TPR, CLIL, enjoyment, assessment.*

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**ЭФФЕКТИВНЫЕ МЕТОДЫ НАЧАЛЬНОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ
АНГЛИЙСКОМУ ЯЗЫКУ:
ОБЗОР, ОСНОВАННЫЙ НА ИССЛЕДОВАНИЯХ**

***Аннотация:** в статье обобщаются современные эффективные практики обучения английскому языку детей 5–12 лет: метод физического реагирования (TPR), сторителлинг, предметно-языковое интегрированное обучение (CLIL), цифровые технологии, аффективная поддержка и оценивание. Младшие школьники отличаются конкретным мышлением, коротким вниманием (15–20 минут) и тем, что эмоции (особенно удовольствие) являются главным предиктором вовлечённости и успеха. TPR эффективен для запоминания лексики через движение. CLIL (обучение другим предметам через английский) повышает языковую компетенцию. Инструменты ИИ дают обратную связь по произношению, но требуют подготовки учителей и соблюдения этических норм. Удовольствие напрямую повышает успеваемость, а не только вовлечённость. Оценивание должно быть безоценочным, формирующим и многообразным. Ключевой вывод: удовольствие — не «приятное дополнение», а базовая педагогическая необходимость.*

***Ключевые слова:** обучение английскому младших школьников, TPR, CLIL, удовольствие, оценивание.*

1. Introduction.

Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) – children aged approximately 5 to 12 – has become a global educational priority. Unlike adolescents or adults, young learners have unique cognitive, affective, and developmental characteristics. They think concretely, have short attention spans, and learn best through movement, play, and positive emotions. Effective primary English instruction, therefore, cannot simply be a scaled-down version of adult teaching. It requires specialised pedagogical practices rooted in child development research. This article synthesises current evidence on effective practices, including Total Physical Response (TPR), storytelling, Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), age-appropriate digital technology use, affective support, and assessment. The central argument is that successful teaching for young learners integrates multiple approaches while prioritising enjoyment as the strongest predictor of both engagement and proficiency.

2. Understanding Young Learners: Developmental Foundations.

Young learners differ from older learners in three fundamental ways.

Cognitive development. Children aged 5–8 rely on concrete, intuitive thinking; they need visual, auditory and kinesthetic input. Abstract grammar explanations or de-contextualised drills are inappropriate. Children aged 9–12 gradually develop logical thinking but still benefit from concrete contexts. Effective teaching uses multisensory, activity-based methods.

Attention and engagement. Average sustained attention spans are 15–20 minutes. Young learners are naturally drawn to novelty. Instead of demanding longer focus, effective teachers structure lessons with frequent activity changes, songs, movement, and varied interaction patterns.

Affective primacy. For young learners, emotions drive learning more than for any other age group. Intrinsic motivation (enjoyment, curiosity, positive relationships) outweighs extrinsic goals. Research shows that enjoyment is the strongest predictor of both engagement and English proficiency, surpassing anxiety and boredom. Positive feedback can increase children’s language output by up to 37%, while excessive error correction leads to withdrawal.

These developmental facts establish the foundation for all evidence-based TEYL practices.

3. *The TESOL 6 Principles for Young Learners.*

The TESOL International Association's 6 Principles for Exemplary Teaching of English Learners have been adapted specifically for young learners (ages 2–12). They provide an overarching framework.

1. *Know your learners* – their cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional development, home languages, and cultures.

2. *Create conditions for language learning* – safe, supportive, low-anxiety environment; engaging materials; positive teacher-learner relationships.

3. *Design high-quality lessons* – clear objectives, meaningful contexts, interaction, scaffolding.

4. *Adapt lesson delivery as needed* – respond to learners' emerging needs in real time.

5. *Monitor and assess student language development* – use developmentally appropriate, integrated, growth-focused assessment.

6. *Engage and collaborate within a community of practice* – ongoing professional learning, collaboration with colleagues and families.

A recent study mapping Serbian early language research onto these principles found significant progress but also persistent gaps – a pattern relevant to many countries.

4. *Core Instructional Methodologies.*

4.1. *Total Physical Response (TPR) and Embodied Learning.*

TPR, developed by James Asher, teaches language through physical action: learners respond to verbal commands with body movements. It aligns perfectly with young children's preference for learning by doing.

Typical activities: «Simon Says», action songs, TPR storytelling (children act out events as the teacher narrates). *Evidence:* vocabulary retention improves when combined with movement; TPR reduces stress and increases motivation. A study of

four-year-olds in a Catalan preschool combined storytelling and TPR and found significant gains in receptive and productive vocabulary, increased motivation, and better connection between graphics and meaning.

4.2. *Storytelling and Play-Based Learning.*

Stories provide meaningful contexts, repetitive language patterns, emotional engagement, and opportunities for retelling and dramatisation. Play-based learning – games, role-play, puppets – creates «safe speaking spaces» where children willingly take risks.

A pilot programme using a classroom puppet (LABUBU) as a learning anchor found that children began asking «Can we do English now?» – transforming language learning from a required task into a desired activity. Systematic reviews emphasise that effective vocabulary instruction for young learners requires multiple exposures and active engagement, both naturally facilitated by storytelling and play.

4.3. *Eclectic, Principled Approach.*

Contemporary TEYL rarely relies on a single method. Effective teachers weave together TPR, stories, games, songs, and CLIL elements, choosing practices that fit their learners and context. The key is principled eclecticism, not random activity switching.

5. *Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Primary Education.*

CLIL – teaching non-language subjects (science, maths, art) through English – provides meaningful, context-embedded language learning. Instead of studying abstract grammar, children acquire language while learning about real content.

5.1. *Empirical Evidence.*

A 2026 study examined 101 primary learners (mean age 10.9) in Basque immersion schools. One group received CLIL for English in three subjects (five sessions per week) plus traditional EFL; the other received only EFL instruction. Results: CLIL students outperformed peers in *language use*, and no significant difference was found for content/organisation. Importantly, despite the non-CLIL school having higher soci-

oeconomic status, CLIL mitigated the impact of lower SES on language use. The authors conclude that CLIL can enhance written linguistic proficiency and alleviate educational disparities in multilingual settings.

5.2. *CLIL for Grammar and Beyond.*

Traditional grammar drills are often demotivating for young learners. CLIL offers a more engaging alternative: grammar emerges naturally from projects, storytelling, interactive games, and visual aids. The *4Cs Framework* (Content, Communication, Cognition, Culture) helps teachers plan CLIL lessons. Key considerations: appropriate scaffolding, attention to cognitive maturity, and assessment that addresses both content and language outcomes.

6. *Digital Technologies in Primary English Education.*

6.1. *Technology-Enhanced Speaking Tasks.*

A 2025 research project explored preservice and in-service primary English teachers' use of technology-enhanced tasks to support oral communicative competence. Implemented in three primary schools, the study found that teachers perceived such tasks as highly suitable for young learners, implicitly promoting digital and media literacy alongside language skills.

6.2. *Artificial Intelligence (AI).*

AI tools – speech recognition, natural language processing, adaptive systems – offer real-time pronunciation feedback and personalised practice. A study of an R&T (robot and tangible objects) learning system with 29 elementary students over five days found significant improvements in pronunciation and willingness to communicate. Video recordings showed active engagement (multiple attempts, active help-seeking).

Challenges: insufficient teacher training, fragmented resources, urban-rural digital divide, data privacy concerns. *Recommendations:* balanced integration of AI with teacher-led instruction; locally developed resources for young learners; ethical guidelines and equitable access.

6.3. *Developmentally Appropriate Technology Use.*

Technology is most effective when it supports active (not passive) learning, facilitates interaction, provides immediate constructive feedback, is embedded in meaningful pedagogical sequences, and builds digital literacy implicitly. The scarcity of research on digital activity for 6- to 14-year-olds remains a concern.

7. Affective Dimensions: Enjoyment, Motivation, and Anxiety.

For young learners, how they feel about English predicts how well they learn.

7.1. The Central Role of Enjoyment.

A study of 111 Grade 3–4 EFL children examined relationships among foreign language emotions (anxiety, boredom, enjoyment), engagement, and proficiency. *Key finding:* enjoyment was the strongest predictor of both engagement and proficiency, followed by boredom. Path analysis revealed only two direct relationships: enjoyment→engagement and enjoyment→proficiency. There was no direct path from emotions to proficiency via engagement. This means that enjoyment directly boosts proficiency, not just by increasing engagement. Teachers should prioritise creating joyful learning experiences as a core pedagogical strategy, not as a reward.

7.2. Motivational Interventions.

A 27-week quasi-experimental study with 391 Chinese junior secondary students tested four conditions: control, experience-related motivational strategies, vision-related strategies (possible future selves), and an integrated condition. Results: all three interventions had immediate positive effects on willingness to communicate (WTC), self-confidence, and anxiety. Sustained effects: vision-only and integrated treatments maintained impact on WTC; integrated strategies produced the strongest overall effect. For young learners, combining «vision of future English use» with concrete positive experiences is most powerful.

7.3. Classroom Practices to Support Affect.

Differentiated tasks (Zone of Proximal Development): basic templates for lower-proficiency learners, open-ended extensions for higher-proficiency learners.

Positive feedback «sandwich»: praise + specific suggestion + encouragement.

Morning Circle (5–10 minutes daily): each child shares something simple (e.g., «My favourite colour»), building community and belonging.

Error correction should be selective and kind – excessive correction increases anxiety and reduces output.

8. *Assessment Practices for Young Learners.*

Assessing young learners requires a fundamentally different approach from testing adults.

Key principles:

- integrated into instruction – assessment is not a separate stressful event;
- growth-oriented – focus on progress, not deficits;
- multimodal – use pictures, speaking tasks, simple written responses, observations;
- low-stakes – minimise anxiety;
- involving learners – simple self-assessment checklists, portfolios.

Diagnostic assessment of reading fluency helps identify learners needing targeted support. A phonics-led, assessment-driven approach has proven effective in strengthening early literacy. Formative assessment (e.g., exit tickets, thumbs up/down, mini whiteboards) provides immediate feedback for teaching decisions.

Avoid: formal grammar tests for 5-8 year-olds, public comparison of results, or grading that discourages risk-taking.

9. *Global Practices and Persistent Challenges.*

The British Council's Global Practices in Teaching Young Learners project (comparing 2010 and 2020 data) provides a comprehensive picture.

Persistent challenges.

1. Insufficient teacher preparation specifically for young learners (many primary English teachers have only general training).
2. Large class sizes (30+ students), making individualised attention difficult.
3. Lack of appropriate materials (textbooks often designed for adolescents).
4. Tension between communicative goals and exam-driven education systems.

Creative local solutions with global relevance.

1. Using recycled materials for flashcards and games.
2. «Group leaders» and «stations» to manage large classes.

3. Culturally adapted TPR and storytelling (e.g., using local folk tales).
4. Peer tutoring and mixed-ability grouping to increase speaking opportunities.

The report also notes that while many teachers report high confidence in using technology, actual pedagogical integration remains limited. Professional development should focus on how to use technology for language learning, not just which tools exist.

10. *Future Directions and Recommendations.*

10.1. *Research Gaps.*

Longitudinal studies tracking young learners over several years.

AI and AR/VR research focused specifically on 5-12 year-olds (most studies are with older learners).

CLIL adaptations for different age bands (5–8 vs. 9–12).

Assessment literacy of primary English teachers.

Teacher education for TEYL – what kind of preparation works best?

10.2. *Evidence-Based Recommendations for Practice.*

Table 1

Domain	Recommendation
Methodology	Use TPR, storytelling, and play as core, not as «fillers». Ensure 50%+ of lesson time involves physical activity or interaction
Content	Integrate CLIL: teach one non-language subject through English each week (e.g., maths, art, science)
Affect	Systematically build enjoyment: end every lesson with a moment of positive feedback or a game. Use the «sandwich» method for corrections
Technology	Use AI for pronunciation practice and adaptive vocabulary drills, but always combine with teacher interaction. Limit screen time to 15-20 minutes per lesson
Assessment	Use ongoing formative assessment (observation checklists, exit tickets). Assess reading fluency through one-minute timed readings. Involve students in self-assessment with smiley-face scales
Teacher development	Join TEYL-focused professional learning communities. Observe colleagues who excel with young learners

11. *Conclusion.*

Teaching English to young learners is a specialised profession that requires understanding of child development, a repertoire of active and playful methodologies, attention to emotional climate, and assessment practices that encourage rather than

frighten. The evidence is clear: effective primary English instruction is not about covering a textbook quickly or drilling grammar. It is about creating a joyful, supportive environment where children *want* to participate, where movement and stories make language memorable, and where content (science, art, stories) gives language real purpose.

The most important single finding is the primacy of *enjoyment*. For young learners, enjoyment directly predicts both how engaged they will be and how much English they will ultimately learn. This is not a soft «nice-to-have» – it is a hard pedagogical fact. Teachers who prioritise fun, positive relationships, and a low-anxiety classroom are not «entertaining» children; they are building the neural and emotional foundations for lifelong language learning.

When children ask, «Can we do English now?» because they genuinely look forward to lessons, the teacher has achieved something far more valuable than any single test score. That is the hallmark of effective practice in primary English language education.

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