

### Editorial: Introduction to the special issue on teaching English reading and writing to young learners

We aimed for this special issue to offer up empirically supported advice to teachers for tackling some of the challenges in teaching reading and writing to young English as a second (L2) or foreign language (FL) learners. These challenges teachers face when providing instruction to young learners include cognitive development, motivation, attention, strategy use, and assessment (Nunan, 2011). It is now well understood that the teaching of reading and writing to young learners can no longer be equated with the teaching of adult learners (Cameron, 2001). In terms of cognitive development, language learners need to go through significant developmental changes in their learning journey from infancy to adulthood (Richardson, 2019). These differences in language learners' cognitive development call for a need to design language learning tasks and materials that can fit the developmental stages of learners (Teng, 2020a). Language learner motivation can decline over time due to a lack of clarity in the goals of language learning and potential feelings that effort invested in learning the language has not paid off (Linse & Nunan, 2006). Furthermore, as young learners tend to have short attention spans, activities that can maintain their motivation and involvement are essential (Fenyvesi, 2020). Language learning strategy researchers have focused their attention on adult learners; however, we believe they should begin considering young learners' language use and learning preferences, as this knowledge could help inform teachers' instruction (Plonsky, 2019). To provide proper instruction, an educator of young learners must understand these needs. This requires the construction of appropriate language assessment tools, which will allow teachers to gauge learners' strengths and weaknesses; doing so can further facilitate teacher scaffolding and other forms of feedback (Ma & Bui, this issue). Despite the acknowledged impact that these issues have on the teaching of reading

and writing to young learners, we are still lacking in empirical evidence to support many creative and pedagogical decisions made in the young learner classroom (Cameron & McKay, 2010). Our intention in this special issue was to further focus language researchers' attention on the young learner classroom and to encourage a rethinking of classroom practices for teaching reading and writing.

We focused the special issue on English as it has become the *de facto* lingua franca of the global world, and we highlighted reading and writing skills as these are fast becoming an important part of compulsory primary and secondary English classes all over the globe. According to Reynolds and Teng (2019), reading, a skill of accurately decoding and comprehending written texts, is an important foundation skill for young learners. Similarly, writing, a skill for learners to use symbols (letters of the alphabet, punctuation, and spaces) to produce connected text, is increasingly becoming an essential skill in English learning. L2 reading and writing development often begins in the early childhood language classroom. For example, according to Teng and Zhang (2021), the development of young learners' reading and writing starts as early as primary school Grade 1. When learners receive writing instruction, their reading comprehension improves. With this improvement comes the increased ability to synthesize multiple sources of information to produce L2 writing. While few would argue against the claim that L2 reading and writing skills are related, there is a lack of empirical investigations into how to best integrate reading and writing instruction for young learners (Teng & Zhang, 2021). Despite researchers acknowledging that well developed reading and writing skills are essential for L2 learners to engage in critical thinking, learning, and expression, little has been done to reduce the difficulties that many classroom teachers face in the young learner classroom (Reynolds & Teng, 2019). Likewise, learners often find English reading challenging due to the lack of vocabulary knowledge (Teng, 2020b) and struggle to write in English due to their lacking knowledge in how to apply writing strategies (Teng, 2019, 2021). Given that English is being taught at an increasingly younger age around the world (Nunan, 2011), it is important for English language teaching (ELT) researchers to offer frontline teachers empirically informed routes to enhance reading and writing learning and instruction for young learners. Collected together in this special issue, you will find six studies leading the way in addressing some of the issues discussed above.

The first two studies investigated English reading from the learners' point of view. Ke and Zhang's "Morphological Instruction and Reading Development in Young L2 Readers: A Scoping Review of Causal Relationships" starts off the issue with the aim to explore the causal relationship between morphological instruction and L2 reading development by synthesizing 12 primary studies published between 2004 and 2019. The focus was on learners in four countries

(China, Egypt, Singapore, and the USA) learning English in kindergarten up to and including Grade 12. The results of the scoping review supported the view that explicit morphological instruction could lead to an increase in morphological awareness and vocabulary knowledge for learners in Grade 3 and above. However, the authors also pointed out that the evidence concerning whether morphological instruction is more or less effective for phonological awareness, word reading accuracy and fluency, spelling, and reading comprehension was lacking. In addition to succinctly synthesizing these study results, they laid out a research agenda for future researchers, advising them to consider measuring transfer effects, adopting a cross-linguistic perspective, and exploring morphological instruction in younger children. In the second paper, "Exploring the Importance of Vocabulary for English as an Additional Language Learners' Reading Comprehension," Brooks, Clenton, and Fraser report on an investigation of factors (i.e., vocabulary knowledge, word decoding skills, reading fluency, and general linguistic ability) that may affect the reading comprehension abilities of English as an additional language (EAL) learners in a Japanese secondary school. Although their findings suggested linguistic ability and reading fluency are important variables, differences in vocabulary were a more robust predictor of reading comprehension. Given this finding, they argued that it is essential for English teachers to provide vocabulary support to EAL and L2 learners to enhance their reading comprehension of academic texts.

The next two studies in this special issue investigated English writing from the learners' point of view. In the third paper, "Topic Familiarity and Story Continuation in Young English as a Foreign Language Learners' Writing Tasks," Bui and Luo investigated how story continuation under different topic familiarity conditions serves as a viable pedagogical means for secondary school students to practice L2 writing. Their results showed that learners who wrote on familiar topics produced longer texts and demonstrated greater lexical diversity than those who wrote about unfamiliar topics; however, topic familiarity did not affect writing quality or lexical sophistication. They suggested that teachers use familiar stories as a catalyst in English writing tasks designed for young learners. They also added that teachers may consider the use of story continuation as a means of encouraging creativity in the writing produced by young learners. In the fourth study, "Creative Writing for Publication: An Action Research Study of Motivation, Engagement, and Language Development in Argentinian Secondary Schools," Banegas and Lowe report on an action research project aimed at encouraging the motivation and engagement of teenage learners in Argentina through their involvement in a creative writing for publication project. They found that this teaching approach resulted in increased learner engagement and motivation due to the authenticity afforded by enabling the learners to become

L2 materials developers as a part of their own L2 learning experiences. The authors suggest that other English writing teachers who wish to implement similar projects initially focus primarily on meaning in their feedback, which can be later accompanied by a focus on form, and include some external motivation factor such as their use of e-book publication, to be read by language learning peers.

The last two studies in this special issue focused on matters related to teacher feedback and assessment. In the fifth paper, "Innovating Teacher Feedback with Writing Activities Aimed at Raising Secondary School Students' Awareness of Collocation Errors," Reynolds and Teng reported on an examination of the types of written corrective feedback given by second language writing teachers with reference to Taiwanese secondary school students' verb-noun collocation errors. The data were extracted from the English Taiwan Learner Corpus, the largest annotated learner corpus of English in Taiwan. Teacher feedback given to 518 students during one academic year was extracted from the corpus for analysis. Results indicated that the secondary school writing teachers provided direct and indirect feedback more often than metalinguistic feedback. The researchers argued that the teachers' limited linguistic resources, as evidenced by multiple occurrences of inappropriate feedback, may have predisposed them to providing ill-informed or incomplete written feedback for word choice errors. As one solution, the authors offer up the suggestion that teachers provide four-stage writing activities that target pre-selected formulaic language which can simultaneously increase young learners' awareness of formulaic language while also reducing the burden of teacher marking to that of the targeted items. In the last contribution, "Chinese Secondary School Teachers' Conceptions of L2 Assessment: A Mixed-methods Study," Ma and Bui report on an investigation of Chinese secondary school teachers' conceptions of L2 assessment in the context of an exam-oriented educational system. Their quantitative results showed that the 66 teacher participants viewed assessment as an aid to learning; however, the results also indicated that teachers may be less likely to adopt formative assessment initiatives that emphasize student development. The qualitative findings further revealed individual differences in the two case study teachers' conceptions and practice of assessment as well as the interplay among meso-level (e.g., school), micro-level (e.g., student), and macro-level (e.g., sociocultural and policy contexts) factors in shaping the teachers' different conceptions and practices of assessment. The researchers argued that it is important to consider the interplay of macro-, meso-, and micro-level factors in order to develop teachers' assessment literacy.

While the benefits of introducing reading and writing to learners in early years are evident, recent economic, social, political, and educational developments have also made it clear to classroom practitioners and education researchers that

there is still a need for change in the approaches used in the teaching of reading and writing (Reynolds & Teng, 2021). More research is needed to address the question whether these approaches or techniques can be implemented within the confines of current education systems. This special issue, responding to these needs, aimed to draw a fuller picture of the diversity of approaches available to teachers and address the challenges faced by young learners when learning to read and write in English. This special issue delineates innovative teaching, serving as a useful descriptor of current trends in the development of reading and writing instruction for young learners. Learning to read and write is a complex and difficult process because it requires metacognitive knowledge, cognitive activities, strategies, motivation, attention, and skills in text organization, production, and revision (Teng & Zhang, 2021). We cannot address all of these in one special issue, and it is clear to us that additional research is still sorely needed. However, we hope that this special issue can drive evidence-based assessment, instruction, and intervention, and push educational public policy to support the advancement of the teaching and assessment of reading and writing for young learners.

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