

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of *English for Primary Teachers*

Yen T. Vo

Authors: Mary Slattery and Jane Willis
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Teaching English as a foreign language to young children has become especially significant in recent years because many countries are starting English instruction in elementary school. However, most English teachers whose first language is not English find it difficult to lead successful classes even when they have been trained for this level or higher levels. They often lack confidence in using classroom English and knowledge or experience in choosing or using engaging activities for young language learners. Fortunately, *English for Primary Teachers* by Mary Slattery and Jane Willis addresses these issues.

English for Primary Teachers is written especially for non-native speaking English teachers of children aged 4 to 12, including in-service teachers, pre-service teachers, teacher trainers, all of who can use it in a course or for self study. The book is a very useful resource particularly for those with little background knowledge about, or experience in, teaching young children. It provides much insight into not only how children acquire their first language, but also how a language teacher can help children acquire English as a second language. It also has an attached CD recording of classroom English. Consequently, by working through the book and the CD together, teachers might expand their knowledge of teaching activities suitable for young language learners and develop confidence in using more English in teaching those activities.

Slattery and Willis write in a teacher-friendly format that helps readers follow their ideas easily. In ten chapters and covering 148 pages, they discuss first language acquisition, second language acquisition, and a wide range of techniques and activities for teaching the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing to children learning English. Activities are carefully arranged according to the natural process of young children's language acquisition. In other words, the book shows teachers how to help children develop their English skills, beginning with listening and developing gradually to writing.

In the first three chapters the authors demonstrate how to develop listening skills in children through activities that include giving instructions in English, listening and doing (or Total Physical Response), listening and drawing, etc. The next two chapters are devoted to activities in which children practice speaking with the teacher's support first, as in saying rhymes and singing songs or playing vocabulary games, and then more freely, such as in eliciting personal talk, speaking games, or speaking in groups. Then in later chapters, readers are introduced to activities that develop reading and writing skills through retelling a story as a class, making lists, writing to pen pals, and other suggestions. Finally, in Chapter Ten, the authors develop a general picture of what ESL/EFL teachers need in order to prepare for their lessons. With such an organization, teachers who read this book will have an overall view of the process of



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language learning and numerous ideas about how to facilitate it. In addition to the book's core content, readers also will find a helpful list of recommended books and websites related to language teaching issues.

Another feature of the book's organization that is helpful to readers is that each chapter follows the same outline and layout. The first page contains a box on the left side outlining the objectives and summary of the chapter's content, which includes teaching principles, activities, guidelines, models, and tips used to help young children learn English. In this respect, Slattery and Willis's book is similar to a number of others available on the market now. However, what is unique is that each chapter also includes authentic examples of classroom English used by successful, non-native English-speaking teachers from primary schools around the world. Samples of classroom English are provided for different situations that occur in class, such as greeting the class, introducing new lessons, organizing activities, and ending lessons. More will be said about this feature below.

English for Primary Teachers offers excellent advice on teaching principles and practices for any primary level English language teacher. For example, as an experienced middle school EFL teacher, I found chapters One, Five, and Ten to be especially informative. Chapter One is about first and second language acquisition. Chapter Five addresses various ways to help young language learners speak English more fluently. And Chapter Ten talks about the teacher's lesson preparations, including planning for classroom English as well as choosing teaching materials and activities. In the paragraphs below, I will delve deeper into these chapters, as I find them most useful.

Chapter One, entitled "Teaching Young Learners," presents an overview of the process of first language and second language acquisition. Slattery and Willis emphasize the similarities between first and second language acquisition in young learners. They explain that teachers of English to young students can think of their role as similar to that of a mother helping her child with his or her first language. For example, in the first language

children hear their mother's voice from birth, receive a lot of positive reinforcement when they begin to play with sounds, and then, many months later, begin to speak. Similarly, young second language learners acquire English by hearing English from their teacher. It means that language learners need to absorb a great deal of English from their teacher before they can be expected to produce natural phrases or sentences (Slattery & Willis, 2009, pp. 10-11).

Moreover, a typical feature of conversations between mothers and their children is that mothers talk considerably more than their children do. They talk to their children without insisting that children reply or that their replies conform to adult speech. In addition, mothers provide a safe and comfortable environment for children to speak the language out loud (p. 11). Teachers of English to young children can emulate these features in their teaching so that they can help young learners acquire English. One additional similarity between home and school is that a pleasant learning environment for young language learners is extremely vital. Thus, listening and reacting positively to what children say, as well as supporting them, will provide a secure and supportive environment that gives young children confidence to try out the language.

By understanding how young language learners acquire their first language, an English language teacher will be better prepared to help children acquire English as a second language. The first chapter provides a wide range of methods that ESL/EFL teachers can use to help their young students learn English, such as repeating phrases, keeping their attention by asking them questions, reacting positively to what they say, or adding to or improving what they say (p. 11). Furthermore, teachers should speak in English to young learners in various stages of the lesson, such as the introduction, class management, activity transition, and closing, in order to help them acquire the language. For instance, at the beginning of each lesson the teacher greets the class with "Good morning," or "Good afternoon," checks attendance with statements such as, "Let's call

the roll,” or “Let’s check to see who is here,” or organizes the class as in, “Get your books and pencils out,” etc. Besides that, there are a variety of activities that the teacher can use to start lessons. Playing simple games such as Bingo and Lucky Numbers, singing a familiar song, or repeating previously learned question routines are examples (p. 14). The more comprehensible English that children hear, the more they will learn. Through listening and absorbing a lot of English from the teacher, young learners will gradually begin to speak English during their interactions with others.

After focusing on the similarities between first and second language acquisition in young children in Chapter One, Slattery and Willis present three chapters centered on listening and speaking activities with teacher’s support before children are ready to speak more freely. In Chapter Five the authors introduce useful activities that the teacher can use to encourage children to speak more English. They emphasize that when teaching language, it is essential for the teacher to think of the whole child and encourage general cognitive and educational development. Thus, the choice of topics and language activities is extremely significant because the teacher can help children to simultaneously develop cognitive skills along with fluency in English (p. 54). The teacher might select and combine a wide range of types of thinking and language activities, including listing, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing, predicting and problem-solving, sharing personal experiences, and producing creative work. For example, if a teacher has two pictures and asks students to find what is similar and what is different in the two pictures (p. 55), they have to identify features, make decisions about them, and explain their decisions to someone else.

Furthermore, the authors consider eliciting personal talk to be an effective activity to prompt students to speak freely. Children generally like to talk about themselves and also like to listen to other classmates sharing about their hobbies, families, studies, and so forth. For instance, in a conversation between a teacher and young students, the teacher motivates the students to speak freely by

asking them some questions relating to their families such as, “Giada, have you got any brothers or sisters?” or “How many sisters have you got?” (p. 56).

In addition to choosing speaking themes and teaching activities to encourage young students to speak English, Slattery and Willis point out that speaking games are also useful in contributing to children speaking English. Some examples are: passing the ball, guessing the mime, finding four differences, or guessing what animal I am. Through these games young children are provided opportunities to use more English. However, it is very important that the teacher has speaking activities organized effectively, starting with teacher-controlled activities, then moving on to less-controlled activities via pair and group work. The authors additionally addressed the benefits of having students work in pairs and groups. During pair and group work, students have more chances to use English. They can ask and answer questions, learn a lot from their classmates, and gain confidence as they are speaking in small groups rather than in front of the whole class (p. 62). Last but not least, the teacher should create a positive environment so that children do not feel shy or embarrassed to speak English. It means that the teacher accepts and respects the children’s efforts at using English to communicate in the classroom, even if they make mistakes when producing words and sentences. In order to achieve well-performed teaching activities and a comfortable environment for the children, the teacher must have well-planned lessons – then he or she will be successful in helping students to learn.

The requirements for lesson preparation in order to help young students acquire English are covered in Chapter Ten, “Planning for Effective Use of English in the Classroom,” which is presented after several chapters on reading and writing activities. First of all the authors remind readers how a language teacher uses English as he or she is teaching the students to learn more English. Teachers can use English in various ways, including beginning the class, talking about what they are doing during the class, playing

games, telling stories, and praising and encouraging students. Especially, to help students understand what the teacher is saying, a teacher may use the tone of voice, eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, pictures, or real objects. Teachers can include responding to students in the mother tongues, recasting (i.e., rephrasing what children say by repeating the children's speech in a different way in better English), and correcting the children with specific techniques that encourage students to learn English.

Besides using more English in the classroom, language teachers can use their course book as a useful resource because it offers them a great deal of activities, offers learning aids to children, and sets general standards. Apart from the course book, there are also many other important resources that teachers can use to support their teaching, such as storybooks, pictures, word cards, posters, video recorders, and computers. Another point presented in Chapter Ten is how detailed lesson preparation will help a teachers' own use of English in the classroom. Teachers can make a plan for their course concerning different sections: before the course, general lesson preparation, and specific language planning for a lesson. Particularly in the part on specific language planning for a lesson, teachers can prepare what they are going to say in different stages of the lesson. For example, they may prepare how to say greetings to students, how to set up an activity, or how to organize their students. Besides planning lessons, teachers should develop their own plans to adapt to their specific classes and circumstances.

All in all, this book is a wealth of practical ideas not only for novice teachers but also for experienced teachers, especially those in an EFL context. Novice teachers who feel shy and ashamed about their level of English and may use their first language entirely in the classroom or those whose teaching activities are limited may indeed benefit from the book since they can apply a variety of other activities that are both fun for their young children and rich in natural language learning opportunities. The book also gives novice teachers an opportunity to gain confidence in

using English in the classroom as it is filled with helpful examples of classroom English in normal, everyday settings. Readers are exposed to experiences from other non-native and native teachers from around the world. For instance, the book is a valuable resource for novice EFL primary teachers since they can improve their classroom English by listening to typical samples on the CD. In addition to everyday English lessons, they can broaden their language teaching activities by learning from other teachers' experiences. Besides that, teachers who have many years of child teaching experience can enhance their classroom English and their teaching activities. Through reading the book and listening to the CD, they are likely to be encouraged to use more English in their classrooms and make their daily teaching activities more effective.

The book is additionally a valuable resource for trainers and tutors in training courses for primary teachers of English. It provides many activities, techniques, teaching tips, further study ideas, and classroom extracts on the CD for them to try out. Indeed, the book is a useful resource of teaching techniques and classroom English because it interlaces the personal experiences of both authors, who have many years of working as English teachers and teacher trainers in various different countries, as well as the experiences of thirteen native and non-native primary teachers and trainers from different parts of the world. Finally, the authors include a glossary at the end of the book, which is extremely helpful for readers to understand technical words, phrases, and the concepts used throughout the chapters.

Apart from the book's strengths, one weakness must be mentioned. Slattery and Willis had good intentions when they included a CD of classroom English for readers to listen to and practice with. While it is particularly useful for pronunciation and sentence intonation, it is very limited in its content. It includes basic classroom instructions for a typical lesson as described in Chapter One. The next chapters include little specific language that is relevant to particular activity types. In addition, the authors could have done a better job to provide a wider

range of themes of classroom English, even though one of the book's objectives is to supply classroom English required for primary teachers of English. For instance, language functions related to apologies, suggesting and persuading, and sequencing are not presented in this book. Also, language related to common topics such as seasonal and occasional themes is absent. In this regard, I would recommend supplementing this book with two other books: *Classroom Language* by Sagrario Salaberri (1995), and *Teaching English to Children* by Wendy A. Scott and Lisbeth H. Ytreberg (1990). A combination of these three books results in more complete coverage of classroom English for primary teachers all over the world.

In conclusion, *English for Primary Teachers* by Slattery and Willis provides primary teachers and trainers with a valuable resource in terms of various teaching activities and

techniques, as well as classroom English that is required by the teacher of English in practical day-to-day management of classes. As an EFL teacher, I can improve my classroom English as I listen to and practice recorded extracts from English lessons and pronunciation exercises in the book. I also can enhance my teaching activities of the four skills of English – listening, speaking, reading, and writing. I recommend the book to both native and non-native primary teachers who are teaching young children from 4 to 12 years of age and who are interested in improving classroom English and teaching activities, as well as to teacher trainers. Readers will benefit from the teaching experiences of the authors and the native and non-native teachers from around the world through concrete examples and teaching situations in primary language classes.

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