The world seems to be shrinking very rapidly as international barriers break down and people can more easily come into contact with other cultures and languages through travel, communication or new technology. This so-called globalization of the world is a modern and sometimes controversial trend which looks as though it may be here to stay, at least for the time being. In this chapter we will consider one aspect of this globalization – the growing trend for using English as a world language. This has led to the introduction of English language learning by many children in many countries all over the world. Let us examine this in a little more detail.

First, if English truly has the role of a global language, governments are keen to encourage their citizens to have English language competence for their country’s economic benefit. English now has official status in sixty countries and a prominent position in twenty more countries. Pressure to introduce early English learning has often come from parents who strongly believe that having English as a tool will benefit their children greatly by giving them more opportunities to gain economic, cultural or educational advantages. Until recently, however, English language learning in many countries did not begin until secondary school. This brings us to the next trend, the lowering of the age at which children learn a foreign language.

Governments and private schools all over the world have decided to introduce English at primary level, because there is a strong ‘folk’ belief, a sort of ‘act of faith’, that young children learn languages better and more easily than older children. This means there is a widespread belief that there are definite advantages to introducing language learning early on in life which outweigh the disadvantages. This very controversial issue will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

A worldwide survey of teaching English to young children shows that educationalists all over the world have recognized the need for English language learning at primary level and are doing whatever they can to promote it (see website www.britishcouncil.org/english/eyl/index.htm). This chapter will examine the most common aims and objectives of primary level foreign language learning and also some important considerations of this trend for foreign language learning in secondary schools.
English language learning as a global phenomenon

In a book on the impact of global English on different parts of the world, McArthur (in Graddol and Meinhof 1999:5) writes that East Asia is a particularly good example. He writes that here ‘the entire middle class seem to want English for their children as an international vehicle which they can then use with the rest of the world’. Many countries have now started teaching English in the state primary sector. Where primary ELT in the state sector is not yet widespread, or parents wish to supplement the work of state schools for whatever reason, private schools flourish. Greece and Taiwan are only two examples of the many countries where parents’ wishes have created a rapid growth in private schools for English at primary and secondary levels. In Taiwan, for example, parents say they are only too aware of how competitive the educational climate is. Their children’s attendance at private schools is seen as a way of guaranteeing a head start for their sons and daughters. In countries where educational competition is very strong, many young pupils are faced with a constant round of tests and examinations for English language. Their commitment to and motivation for learning English seems impressively high, although we may sometimes wonder how long this will continue in these conditions.

Within the European Union, 2001 was designated the European Year of Languages, during which many activities were organized to raise the profile of foreign language learning. Its aims were to celebrate the diversity of languages, to encourage lifelong learning and to provide information about the teaching and learning of languages. (See website http://culture.coe.fr/lang/ for the Modern Languages Division of the Council of Europe.) Here and in other parts of the world there is now increasing concern about the status of learning other foreign languages apart from English and fears that English may in fact become too dominant. For example English is increasingly taking on the role of a second national language in many countries such as Sweden, Denmark and Holland where English is the main language of international communication. In a survey conducted in 1989, thirteen countries in the European Union, including Belgium, Spain and Portugal considered foreign language teaching in primary schools to be a national priority. In a growing number of European countries, English is part of the public and family environment, especially through cartoons, television, films, pop music, magazines and newspapers. Thus English is often, but not always, the foreign language of choice. It is perhaps regrettable that this dominance of English pushes other languages into the background, an imbalance which the European Year of Languages has tried to correct.
Why teach a foreign language at primary level?

Europe in the 1960s experienced the first large-scale wave of foreign language learning in primary schools and numerous conferences reported a high level of agreement on language teaching, including UNESCO conferences in 1962 and 1966 (Stern, 1969), and the Council of Europe conferences at Reading (1967). Countries like France began experiments to determine how far primary foreign language learning (FLL) might be successful. A report by Girard (1974) provided a detailed overview of several European FLL projects. This report underlined the need for creating, first of all, the optimal or best conditions for teaching languages. He referred to six important conditions: having appropriately trained teachers, proper timetabling with sufficient timing, appropriate methodology, continuity and liaison with secondary schools, provision of suitable resources and integrated monitoring and evaluation. These conferences and reports highlighted the following issues for introducing early foreign language learning:

- Advantage can be taken of certain aptitudes children have.
- There is no theoretical optimum age to start teaching. The starting age can vary according to country and linguistic situation, although at that time the age of nine was often chosen.
- Early learning of a non-mother tongue language must be integrated into other teaching in the primary school.
- Whatever else may be achieved, the main concern is to prepare the ground so that the most can be made of the teaching which will be received in secondary school.
- The linguistic and pedagogical skills of the teachers are the two most important factors.

One reason for starting to learn a foreign language several years earlier (at age six or nine instead of eleven or twelve) was simply to increase the total number of years spent learning the language. This decision needed to take into account two important considerations: the time factor and the nature of primary methodology. For children it was determined that regular short slots during the week were likely to be more effective than a longer more concentrated slot only once a week. Second, teachers should take account of the methods and the pace of primary school teaching, so that a year of teaching in primary school cannot be equated with a year in secondary school. Another reason most commonly put forward was the fact that young children seem to have a greater facility for understanding and imitating what they hear than secondary school
pupils. Imitation is, of course, not the whole picture in language learning, as we shall see in chapter 2, but it seemed a reasonable strategy to try to take advantage of children’s language learning skills and aptitudes.

**English language learning policies at primary level**

Although there is widespread interest and positive developments in teaching English to learners of primary and secondary age, the worldwide scene is often a patchwork of unrelated projects and initiatives. In the European Union, however, teaching English to young learners is part of a wider picture of a policy for foreign language learning where it has been suggested that EU citizens have a personal document called a European Language Portfolio (ELP). This document is intended to act as a guide to people’s language learning and to show their competence in different languages and their contacts with other cultures. It is available for all ages, from very young children to adults. The ELP has four aims: to encourage people to learn more languages and to continue learning throughout their lives; to improve their learning and their ability to assess their own competence; to help movement within Europe by documenting language skills in a clear and internationally comparable way and to contribute to a shared cultural understanding within Europe.

Where a policy of teaching English to Young Learners (EYL) is introduced, several conditions need to be met. This is vital both for the teachers involved and for the pupils entrusted to their care. The first condition is that it should be properly planned, ideally taking into account the experiences of other countries which have succeeded. Teachers, teacher educators, curriculum designers, materials writers and assessment specialists must have a clear idea of intended goals and outcomes; ideally they will have been involved through consultation or participation in the process of policy creation. This is especially true where such policies are introduced on an experimental basis, as has often been the case with foreign language teaching in primary schools. Second, governments and private institutions must ensure that adequate resources are provided to ensure optimal conditions so that the ‘younger equals better’ slogan can be turned into successful reality. This provision includes not only material resources, appropriate coursebooks and other classroom aids, but also appropriately trained teacher educators and teachers. Third, an evaluation of the learning outcomes after a set period is also essential since these are ultimately expected to provide information on the validity of the teaching, and the cost effectiveness of the national spending involved. In France, for example, future plans announced by the Ministry of Education (see Lang, J. 2001) include
working towards a clear statement of the outcomes and achievements of learners’ foreign language learning.

**Aims and objectives**

The general aims of early foreign language learning should appear attractive to parents, teachers and administrators and workable for children, while avoiding being over-ambitious and unrealistic. This point was recognized early on in France when early controlled trials in teaching modern languages began in elementary school. The policy document stated that the aim was not the creation of bilingual children but more reasonably, ‘to prepare children linguistically, psychologically and culturally for language learning’ (BOEN 1989). Generally speaking, foreign language programmes tend to include this wide range of possibilities where, for example, the goals of their programmes are not only learning to use the language but also developing sensitivity to and awareness of foreign languages and cultures. In fact, more than a decade after this report, the aims of primary language learning all over the world can generally be classified under these headings: psychological preparation, linguistic preparation and cultural preparation.

![Fig. 1 Objectives of early learning of English](image)

**Psychological preparation**

The primary concern of foreign language teachers is the creation of as many ways as possible of giving their pupils an appetite to learn. In
Japan, for example, the aims of primary ELT, as stated by the Ministry of Education, include ‘to motivate the learner’ and ‘to learn English for interest and fun’. The Ministry of Education in Indonesia has the objective ‘to motivate children to learn English in interesting and fun ways’. In Spain a Curriculum aim of the Reforma is ‘recognizing and appraising the communicative value of a foreign language and their own capacity to learn how to use it’ (cited in Coyle et al. and Valcarcel (1997). More recently, Kubanek-German (1998:194) has written a survey article of primary ELT in Europe. Here she writes that that ‘regional and national guidelines unanimously point out that the children’s experience with a foreign language ought to be enjoyable and not put an extra burden on them’. Teachers will be aware of how much parental expectations can be a positive or negative force in L2 learning. Fortunately, in the case of learning English many parents are highly motivated, a feeling which tends to be passed on to their children. However, teachers will have to work hard to nurture feelings of enthusiasm in their pupils. Cajkler and Addelman (2000:1) write that teachers ‘should not take it for granted that children will arrive in the classroom with a strong positive attitude to foreign language learning’.

A study of the motivation of young learners in Croatia was carried out by Djigunovic and Vilke (2000). In Croatia L2 learning was introduced in a small-scale project in 1991 with first graders (aged six to seven). The authors’ longitudinal study, carried out over eight years, studied these pupils’ attitudes in their first year of learning and on three more occasions – after three, six and eight years of study. Using a methodology based on cross-curricular work (using primary subjects) and storytelling, learners in the first grade particularly liked the activities that had a game element. After three years of learning these pupils still liked the L2 and enjoyed their classes, but by this time they enjoyed not only the game-like activities but also the classroom activities which they perceived as learning and not just fun. As their motivation was high, these learners continued enjoying their English lessons. Even after eight years it was found that their motivation had continued to increase.

Kubanek-German (1998:194) also refers to research on the long-term effects of children learning a foreign language. For example, secondary students who had started learning English in the primary school had a slight advantage in reading, writing and listening. In Italy, primary foreign language learners were found to be more aware of the structure of their L1 than others who had not studied a foreign language and had developed greater ‘language awareness’. Eight-year-olds showed no anxiety when language learning, whereas eleven-year-olds had developed strategies to cope with language anxiety. Finally, she writes that most
studies showed that the courses kindled interest in language learning and in other cultures. If this continues to be the case across most contexts, this will be good news indeed.

Another aspect of psychological preparation is developing awareness of language. Several projects on ‘language awareness’ were published in the UK in the 1980s for English secondary students learning a foreign language. The aim here was to stimulate children’s natural interest and curiosity about language and ‘to challenge pupils to ask questions about language’ (Hawkins 1984:4). The results of experiments inspired by his work generally showed the usefulness of this approach. More recently, the development of children’s ‘metacognitive awareness’ has been analysed in detail by Ellis (see 1999 and chapter 5). She sees it as an umbrella term which covers four different kinds of awareness: language awareness, cognitive awareness, social awareness and cultural awareness. Developing ‘learning awareness’ is essentially a way of helping pupils to understand why and how they are learning another language. The ideal result is that they become more aware of issues such as information about the kind of materials they will use, the strategies which are likely to help them, and how to build up their confidence. This kind of awareness may include focusing on skills such as noticing, observing, analysing, comparing, deducing, or conceptualizing, all of which are skills which Chomsky (1959) claims are part of children’s innate ‘Language Acquisition Device’, which is triggered as part of first language acquisition. (For more on this refer to chapters 2 and 5.) It is increasingly recognized that awareness of processes of this kind is likely to support the acquisition of the skills and the knowledge needed to communicate in a foreign language. One possible objection to awareness raising is that children do not have the necessary mental maturity to carry out and benefit from such a process of reflection. However, studies show that even young children under school age are more aware than one might expect. Here is an example of a child at two years, six months talking about her first language:

Adult: (pointing to child’s foot). What’s that?
Child: A footsie

Adult: (pointing to both feet) What are these?
Child: Two footsies — no two feetsies I mean.

And a child at three years one month
Child: Can I have a bit of cheese, please? Cheese, please, that’s a rhyme. (LINC materials 1991)

Supporters of the ‘awareness raising’ approach believe that helping pupils to learn to make use, or better use, of their innate abilities of observation and comparison is only one more way for them to learn to
communicate in a foreign language. According to Brewster et al. (1992:34), learning to reflect on how the English language functions does not mean taking a course in English grammar. ‘All that is implied is a moment of reflection, if the teacher chooses, whenever the opportunity arises, to draw attention to an interesting language feature. Such a course of action will lead to a better understanding of the way the language functions and result in the memorizing of important rules affecting the ability to communicate’. Seen in this light, learning English in primary school is likely to have a much better chance of being integrated into general learning and helping to reinforce learning in other subjects, including the L1 (see chapter 9). At the same time, children will receive an effective preparation for the teaching programmes they will encounter at secondary school.

**Linguistic preparation**

According to Doyé and Hurrell in a (1997) Council of Europe report, experts favour the goal of developing basic communicative competence in a systematic way in preference to aiming simply for ‘language – sensitization’ or raising ‘language awareness’. In many countries the main language aim for primary ELT is to be able to communicate, or to develop ‘communicative competence’. In Spain, for example, they state that the aim is ‘not to teach a foreign language but to teach how to use it in communication (Coyle, et al. 1997). The Spanish guidelines continue to give very precise accounts of what children are expected to achieve in all four language skills. For example, young pupils are expected to develop global and specific understanding of simple oral texts related to well-known objects, situations and events. They are also expected to use the foreign language orally to communicate with their teacher and their partners in routine classroom activities and in communicative situations created by the teacher for that purpose. Of course, the kinds of language learning points focused on by teachers or materials will vary enormously according to the pupils’ ages and language levels. In the earliest stages, language aims may simply involve getting pupils used to the sounds, rhythm and intonation of English and creating an atmosphere where the child feels able to ‘have a go’ at speaking a few words in another language with confidence. From the beginning parents and children alike are keen to see evidence of being able to say something in the new language. With the young child this is likely to be singing a simple song, reciting an action rhyme or the ability to say ‘My name is …, I’m X years old’, and so on. In line with primary methodology, pupils will probably have the opportunity to learn the English alphabet, memorize simple dialogues, play language games, sing songs and chants, and so on in
ways that keep the child interested, motivated and challenged. By contrast, the guidelines in the European Schools (part of a self-contained educational system consisting of a small number of schools in six member states of the European Union) are deliberately very broad. This freedom from rigidly specified aims is intended to ‘leave room for personal interpretation and application by the individual schools and teachers in accordance with local needs’ (see Housen 1997:42).

Cultural preparation

Another common aim of foreign language learning in many countries is to develop ‘intercultural awareness’. In Spain, for example, the government guidelines include the goal of ‘showing a respectful attitude towards other languages, their speakers and their culture’ (cited in Valcarcel 1997:230). A common way of maintaining pupils’ interest in foreign language learning is to introduce information about the target culture. This is especially effective if this is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as something desirable. Teachers of foreign languages in Britain often despair of motivating some of their pupils; many boys in particular are notorious for not being interested in FLL. However, when European football became a topic in one language class, interest miraculously improved! From the first year onwards, pupils can be introduced to real or fictional characters from other cultures and can focus on aspects of their own lives, such as where they live, what they eat, the clothes they wear, hobbies and sports they enjoy, and so on. According to Brewster et al. (1992:50) ‘provided it is motivating and not abstract, early FLL in the more relaxed context of primary school has a good chance of encouraging children to take an interest and develop a positive attitude towards the foreign country and its people’. Developing cultural awareness is explored in much more detail in chapter 10.

Policy realities

Unfortunately, there is often a mismatch between what policies claim to promote and classroom reality. One study showed that secondary teachers claimed to be using the methodological approach as stated in government policy, but their observed classroom practice showed that they were not. Why does this kind of mismatch between stated aims and actual teaching happen? It may be because a government or institution tries to implement a policy too quickly, so that there is simply not enough time to prepare teacher educators and teachers in appropriate methods. There may not be enough suitable materials and resources, or teachers may be in the grip of tests and examinations
which do not achieve the stated aims, or which even ignore or undermine them.

Policies are not always clear about the end points of the primary phase of learning. What do they consider to be ‘successful learning’? Is this the development of children who can talk fairly confidently about everyday needs and topics? Or who can give simple but clear written instructions about how to do something? Children who can retell and rewrite a story? Or who know the rules for countable and uncountable nouns? The area of determining realistic achievements for young learners is in great need of research. Another crucial point policy makers must also think very carefully about is how primary ELT links up with secondary ELT, where accuracy and grammar-based work is a more appropriate part of the programme. This has been the downfall of several attempts at primary ELT, as we shall see in the next section.

**From primary school to secondary school**

In the past children did not usually learn a foreign language until they went to secondary school. Increasingly, it is likely that children may learn English from the age of nine, six or even younger in either a private or state school or both. In many countries there is very little continuity between primary and secondary schools in all aspects of learning, with the teaching of a foreign language being no exception. Ministries of Education in some countries sponsor programmes for a while, but lose interest and withdraw support when the novelty element has worn off and specialist teachers (perhaps imported) and special in-service training have disappeared. According to Nikolov (2000: 36), this has happened in countries like Italy and Croatia. She writes that ‘absolutely no research has been found into how secondary schools build on existing L2 proficiency’. Aside from this problem, there are the now familiar complaints from secondary teachers that primary pupils have not learned anything useful at primary school. In order to build in an element of sustainability, so important for the continuing existence of new projects, it is important that teaching English at primary level is seen as a way of making the secondary teacher’s job more challenging and interesting, but not more difficult or frustrating. Early L2 learning is only justified if what is learned serves as a springboard, however modest, for the teaching to come. If secondary teachers are not informed about primary L2 methods and achievements, they may simply view their new pupils as problematic, which of course is very detrimental to primary English. Secondary L2 teachers may feel resentful about having to use a completely different approach, using different materials or providing work at different levels to cater for the range of language levels in their classes.
Chapter 1 Foreign language learning at primary level

Where some account has been taken of the necessary continuity of language learning between primary and secondary school it will be recognized that children who have benefited from a properly planned primary programme are better prepared to respond to language teaching in the secondary school. Nothing could be more counter-productive than inaccurate knowledge or language skills which result in the teacher making constant corrections and having to go over what has supposedly already been learned. This is very discouraging for the pupils and can lead to feelings of failure or may replace pupils’ initial enthusiasm and motivation with a negative attitude to L2 learning.

Primary teachers need to take every opportunity to make contact with the secondary school English teachers who will be responsible for teaching their pupils when they move on. Specific ‘primary/secondary school link’ meetings could be organized by the schools’ management or by professional language teaching associations. Ideally, secondary school teachers could be invited to observe classes, see displays of children’s work or review assessment procedures and results. The promotion of teacher development activities which develop feelings of trust and mutual respect between primary and secondary L2 teachers is very useful. In turn, secondary teachers need to recognize the importance of knowing what is happening in their local primary language classes.

Naturally, there is no question of primary school language methodology modelling the teaching of languages at secondary level. Indeed, some people believe that the first year of secondary schools might well learn something from successful primary schools! A basic concern with providing continuity in children’s education means that bridges must be built between the different stages of their language education.

In summary, countries which have introduced foreign language learning at primary level have a core of key questions which they need to address. They include:

- What are the advantages and drawbacks?
- Is there an optimum starting age?
- Who will do the teaching and what kind of training should they receive?
- Who will be the teacher trainers?
- What kinds of methodology can be created which are finely tuned to pupils’ ages, abilities and socio-economic group?
- How far is it beneficial to integrate foreign language learning with the primary curriculum more generally?
What are the merits of developing language awareness as well as language competence?

How can we provide continuity in FLL between primary and secondary schools?

What kinds of learning outcomes and achievements can we expect?

What are the best methods for assessing language development in primary pupils?

Those countries that are veterans, or old-timers in this field, especially in the European Union, will probably have answers to many of these questions, but only if research and evaluation continues to be carefully built into projects and initiatives. Novices to this field will still be answering some of these questions as they go along, sometimes being able to learn from others, often not, as learning contexts can be so different. Where conditions appear to be similar, more shared learning between countries would be an excellent move. You will find that the chapters in this book explore many of the necessary issues to begin answering these questions.

Keeping in touch with English language teachers

The ease with which countries are now able to communicate has made communication with other teachers much easier. For example, the British Council has commissioned a worldwide survey of teaching EYL (see website address on page 1). Organizations such as ELTeCS (English Language Teaching Contacts Scheme), also set up by the British Council, have established extensive regional networks for teachers of primary ELT all over the world (see www.britishcouncil.org/english/eltecs). The International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) also provides an international network for primary foreign language teachers (www.countryschool.com/younglearners.htm). Many useful Council of Europe documents are available from their offices in Strasbourg (www.coe.int).