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Teaching English to young learners: a comparison of kindergarten and primary school methods

Ibrohimova Xulkaroy Muxtorjon qizi

International Nordic University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
E-mail: hulkaroyibrahimova@gmail.com

Abstract
This article argues that kindergarten and primary school English teaching require qualitatively different pedagogies, not merely simpler and harder versions of the same method. Using a comparative analysis of developmental and second language acquisition research, supported by the author's reflective practice in both settings, the study identifies the distinct goals, techniques and teacher roles that suit each stage. It also identifies two common errors: pushing formal literacy and grammar into kindergarten too early, and keeping primary classes at a play-only level after learners are ready for structured work. The article proposes continuity through deliberate "bridging" practices, so that the transition between stages builds on what children already know. The findings offer practical guidance for English teachers and for teacher-training programmes in Uzbekistan.

Keywords
young learners; early language learning; kindergarten; primary school; Total Physical Response; task-based learning; transition.

1. Introduction

English is introduced ever earlier in educational systems around the world, and Uzbekistan is no exception: English is now taught in many kindergartens and from the first grade of primary school. This expansion has created a practical problem. In staff rooms and training courses, "young learners" is often treated as one category, and the same songs, flashcards and games are applied to a four-year-old and to a ten-year-old. Yet these children differ sharply in attention, memory, literacy and the way they make sense of language.

When methods are not matched to the learner's stage, the cost is real. Kindergarten children asked to copy words and repeat rules may associate English with pressure. Primary pupils kept on colouring and singing may lose interest because the work no longer challenges them. Both outcomes weaken motivation, which is the most valuable asset an early learner can bring to later study.

This article therefore examines two questions. (1) How do the goals and methods of English teaching differ between kindergarten and primary school? (2) What practices can connect the two stages so that learners move between them without losing motivation or progress?

The central argument is that the two stages need *different pedagogies built on a shared principle*: language must be meaningful, repeated with variety, and delivered in a low-anxiety environment. Method should change with the child's development, while the underlying principle stays constant.

2. Theoretical Framework

Three strands of theory explain why young learners cannot be taught as one group.

Cognitive development. Piaget (1952) showed that young children think through action and concrete experience. For language teaching this means that a word becomes meaningful when it is attached to an object, a gesture or a situation, and not when it is explained in abstract terms. Abstract rules become accessible only gradually, which is why explicit grammar belongs later than early childhood.

Social interaction and support. Vygotsky (1978) argued that learning is social and that children achieve more with help than alone, within the "zone of proximal development". Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) named the teacher's temporary support *scaffolding*. In language classes, scaffolding takes the form of gestures, pictures, modelled phrases and routines that are gradually withdrawn as the child gains independence.

Meaning first, input first. Cameron (2001) emphasises that children attend to meaning before form and learn best through whole, purposeful activities. Krashen (1982) similarly stressed the role of comprehensible input in acquisition. Pinter (2017) adds that young learners need varied, short activities because concentration is limited, and that

stories, songs and games are not decoration but the actual vehicle of learning. Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2006) conclude from a review of early language learning research that favourable outcomes depend less on starting age alone than on the quality, intensity and continuity of instruction.

Previous empirical work. Studies that compare approaches or examine classroom practice support the view that method and learner stage must match. Rokoszewska (2012) compared the results of young learners taught through the Helen Doron method in private courses with those of learners taught through an eclectic method in a public primary school, treating the choice of method as a variable that shapes outcomes. More recently, Taddese et al. (2025), in a case study of primary schools in Ethiopia, found a significant gap between teachers' actual practice and the principles of effective young-learner teaching, and linked it to limited specialised training. Their conclusion is directly relevant here: without stage-specific preparation, teachers default to habitual methods.

Taken together, these ideas predict that effective teaching will look different at different developmental stages, and that continuity of experience matters as much as the age at which English begins.

3. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative comparative approach. First, it analyses established research and methodological literature on teaching young learners to identify the principles associated with each age group. Second, it draws on the author's reflective practice: approximately four and a half years of teaching English in a kindergarten, a primary school and a medical technical college. The reflective element is used to illustrate and test the literature-based conclusions against real classroom conditions, not as empirical proof. The comparison is organised around five dimensions: goals, skills emphasis, techniques, teacher role and assessment.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Kindergarten (ages 3–6): language through the body, play and rhythm

At this stage the aim is not mastery but *positive first contact* with English. Four practices are most effective.

First, **Total Physical Response** (Asher, 1969) lets children show understanding through movement ("Stand up", "Touch your nose") long before they can produce language. Because the child is not forced to speak, anxiety stays low and comprehension grows.

Second, **songs, chants and rhymes** supply the repetition that young memory requires, and rhythm helps pronunciation and the retention of whole phrases. Repetition is acceptable to children when it is musical and playful, and tedious when it is mechanical.

Third, **repeated storytelling** gives language a context. Ellis and Brewster (2014) show that retelling the same story many times allows vocabulary and structures to be absorbed naturally, and children often begin to join in with key phrases without being asked.

Fourth, **visuals, puppets and real objects** replace translation and explanation. A puppet that "only speaks English" creates a genuine reason to use the language.

What kindergarten teaching should *not* include is equally important: formal writing, explicit grammar and correction of every error. These demands exceed the child's developmental readiness and risk linking English with failure.

4.2. Primary school (ages 7–10): structure, literacy and purposeful tasks

Primary pupils have a longer attention span, growing literacy in their first language and a clearer sense of rules and fairness. Teaching can therefore become more systematic without becoming formal.

Early literacy becomes a central goal. Phonics and letter–sound awareness allow pupils to decode simple words, and carefully graded copying and short writing tasks build confidence. **Task-based and project work**, such as making a class poster, a survey or a picture dictionary, gives pupils a communicative purpose and a visible product. **Vocabulary** can be organised in word groups and revisited systematically, and **basic grammar** is best introduced through examples and patterns (*I like… / Can you…?*) so that learners notice regularities before they are asked to state rules.

Games with rules, such as board games, quizzes and team competitions, suit this age because older children enjoy challenge and structure. Finally, low-stress assessment, including mini-quizzes, speaking tasks and portfolios, lets pupils see their own progress.

4.3. Comparison of the two stages

Table 1 summarises the differences along the five dimensions of analysis.

Table 1

Kindergarten and primary school English teaching compared

Dimension	Kindergarten (ages 3–6)	Primary school (ages 7–10)
Primary goal	Positive attitude, listening comprehension, exposure to sound and rhythm	Foundational literacy, accurate basic structures, learner autonomy
Main skills	Listening and speaking (receptive before productive)	All four skills, with reading and writing growing in weight
Attention span	Short; activities change every 5–7 minutes	Longer; sustained tasks of 10–15 minutes are possible
Core techniques	TPR, songs, chants, puppets, repeated storytelling	Tasks, projects, phonics, rule-based games, pair work
Role of grammar	Absorbed in chunks; never taught explicitly	Noticed through examples; light, guided generalisation
Teacher role	Model, performer and source of rich input	Facilitator and organiser of purposeful tasks
Assessment	Informal observation of response and participation	Mini-quizzes, speaking tasks, portfolios

4.4. Two common errors

The comparison exposes two recurring errors in practice.

The first is "schoolification" of kindergarten. Under pressure from parents or administrators who want visible results, teachers introduce alphabet copying, written tests and grammar drills to children aged four or five. This confuses *visible* progress with *real* progress. A child who can copy ten words but dislikes English has gained little, while a child who understands instructions, enjoys songs and responds eagerly has built the foundation on which later skills depend.

The second is stagnation in primary school. Teachers who rely on kindergarten-style activities with eight- and nine-year-olds may keep lessons pleasant but fail to develop literacy, accuracy or independence. Pupils then reach the upper grades with a limited vocabulary of colours, animals and numbers and little ability to read or write even simple texts.

Both errors stem from the same cause: methods chosen by habit instead of by the learner's developmental stage.

4.5. Bridging the stages

Differences in method do not justify a break in experience. A child who moves from a play-based kindergarten into a more structured primary class meets a sudden change in expectations, and this transition is a critical point at which motivation can fall. Continuity can be created through deliberate bridging: familiar songs and stories carried into the first primary lessons; gradual introduction of letters through the sounds children already know; and shared classroom routines (greetings, "line up" and "sit down" commands) that remain stable across both stages. Such practices let new demands rest on existing confidence.

5. Practical Recommendations

Define stage-specific goals. In kindergarten, evaluate success by participation, comprehension and enjoyment, not by written output.

Keep activities short and varied. Plan kindergarten sessions in blocks of five to seven minutes and primary lessons in blocks of ten to fifteen.

Delay explicit grammar and formal writing until children have a base of oral vocabulary and early literacy in their first language.

Increase challenge steadily in primary school. Introduce phonics, short reading texts and project work as soon as pupils show readiness.

Maintain English as the main classroom language in both stages, supported by gestures, pictures and routines instead of translation.

Create transition programmes. Encourage joint planning between kindergarten and primary teachers, and carry familiar materials into Grade 1.

Train teachers by stage. Teacher-training and professional development should address early childhood and primary English separately, rather than under one general heading of "young learners".

6. Limitations

This study is based on literature analysis and reflective practice, so it does not provide measured learning outcomes. The age boundaries used (3–6 and 7–10) are approximate, and individual children develop at different rates. Future research should compare learner

results, such as listening comprehension, vocabulary and attitude, in Uzbek kindergartens and primary schools through classroom observation, testing and learner questionnaires.

7. Conclusion

Kindergarten and primary school are not two levels of the same course but two distinct stages of learning. In kindergarten, English should be experienced through movement, music, play and story, with the aim of building comfort and comprehension. In primary school, learners are ready for literacy, structured tasks and growing accuracy. The greatest risks are premature formalisation of the early stage and stagnation in the later one. The strongest practice combines stage-appropriate methods with deliberate continuity between stages, so that each learner's experience is a connected path and not a series of disconnected steps.

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