

BOOK REVIEW

Annika Kolb & Marita Schocker. *Teaching English in the Primary School. A Task-Based Introduction for Pre- and In-Service Teachers.* Hannover: Kallmeyer, 2021. 256 pp. € 27.95 pbk.

Reviewed by David Valente (Nord University)

The blurb on the back cover of *Teaching English in the Primary School* states clearly that the book focuses on the German context. Similar publications about primary English language teaching (PELT) focused on the national school system, and written in English, proliferate in Norwegian teacher education programmes, i.e., my professional context. To expose pre- and in-service teachers to scholarship which transcends Norway's national borders, I regularly seek publications such as this one to enrich my course recommended reading lists. Moreover, given that my previous teacher education experience involved design and delivery of pre- and in-service PELT courses for teachers in school contexts in East Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, this review will be framed within an international orientation. From this perspective then, the book's relevance for and suitability as a task-based introduction to PELT for pre- and in-service teacher education beyond Germany will be considered.

Alongside task-based learning and teaching (TBLT), the authors, Annika Kolb and Marita Schocker have adopted a child-centred approach to underpin their 12-chapter volume. The colorful photograph on the front cover reflects this approach with a group of multi-ethnic primary aged children engaged in communication about a picturebook. The contents pages are comprehensive with each chapter's subsections usefully listed for readers to easily identify relevant topics. Chapter 1 centres on the child as English language learner at primary level which should be foundational for any book within PELT pracademia. A survey type chapter follows which outlines the processes involved when PELT research is undertaken. This is clearly written in accessible language which characterizes the reader-friendly style used throughout the book. Next, in Chapter 3, Kolb and Schocker provide a conceptual framework which convincingly applies a TBLT approach to PELT and is illustrated well by a detailed example of a pedagogical task with resonance for the world of the child. The way in which the authors refract familiar areas of PELT as well as more recent developments through a TBLT lens for teacher education is pivotal to the entire book. Their deft interweaving of theory and practice in Chapter 3 is emulated in the subsequent chapters which likewise synthesize empirical studies – predominantly from the

German context – and highlight several insights for the PELT classroom. Such a systematic focus on the empirical domain is well attuned to teacher education at the university level and reflects the strongly research-led orientation of the book. Nevertheless, it would be necessary for teacher educators around the world who plan to use this book to supplement it with empirical research based in their own and other potentially more relatable PELT contexts.

In their introduction, the authors share the rationales behind the book and its intended tripartite audience: teachers of English in primary education, pre-service teachers and in-service teacher educators. They then highlight some recent developments which have impacted PELT as well as significant policy shifts with reference to Europe but with relevance for elsewhere, particularly the expanded educational remit of contemporary PELT which transcends solely linguistic preoccupations. Nowadays, this includes for example, a focus on pedagogical aims related to the development of children's intercultural and diversity awareness (Chapter 8), children's literature (Chapter 7), and media literacy (Chapter 9), areas which remain underrepresented in the PELT research field. These wider educational goals are buttressed by chapters that cover topics commonly found in publications on PELT, such as class management (Chapter 4), communicative competences (Chapter 5), focus on form (Chapter 6), content-based learning (Chapter 10), coursebook materials (Chapter 11) and assessment (Chapter 12).

In terms of the book's organization, Kolb and Schocker refer to an "inductive bottom-up approach" (p.13). This is realized through their incorporation of practical reflection tasks at the outset of each chapter, subsequently returned to at the end to enable readers to further reflect on how the scholarly work has contributed to their understanding. These carefully planned reflective tasks are creative and personalized with relevance for both pre- and in-service teachers and could be readily used in several contexts around the world. As an organizational principle, the systematic incorporation of pedagogical reflection is especially valuable as it helps transform the background reading into interactive session content for use in teacher education courses. Another useful feature is the ten-page supplementary resource which is downloadable from the publisher's website with the code on the final page. This PDF comprises practical information about PELT journals, professional associations, pedagogical resources, research and classroom videos and in the case of most of the resources I sampled, they are applicable for PELT internationally. Conversely, while each chapter concludes with (usually three) references for recommended further reading, many of these relate specifically to the German context. For use of the book in other contexts, these sources would need to be supplemented by additional contextually relevant references.

Despite the strengths outlined above, in recognition of the international scope of PELT teacher education, it would be remiss not to question some terms employed within the book. Section 4 of Chapter 1 is headed, “The primary EFL classroom” and Chapter 2 is entitled, “Research on primary EFL”. The acronym “EFL” is used as the default and the concept of English as a “foreign” language remains unproblematicized which could potentially be a barrier in the multitude of PELT contexts where English cannot be comfortably categorized as “foreign.” Furthermore, as Bland and Mourão (2018) explain, the use of EFL implies that “English is ‘owned’ by certain groups and is foreign to others. This goes against the fluid concept of English as a lingua franca, or even Englishes, for international communication” (p.2). They instead argue for the adoption of the more neutral term “ELT.” Related to language choices, the authors’ rationale for the generic use of “she” throughout the book warrants critical comment. They state unequivocally that “most of the primary ELT teachers are women” (2021, p.14) and regardless of the veracity of the statement, gender-specific usage is out-of-sync with current thought on gender neutral language use in ELT contexts (see for example, Banegas & Govender, 2022) whereby, the more inclusive “they” would be more appropriate. The issue with overgeneralizations and assumptions regarding gendered pronouns is evident in Chapter 4 when Dr. Subhan Zein is erroneously referred to as “she” (p.62).

To provide a sufficiently balanced impression of the publication, the remainder of this review will comment on two chapters. The first of these has been selected as a very strong exemplar of the book’s manifold affordances. The second will be considered in terms of the potential adaptations that may be necessary if the publication were to be used in PELT teacher education internationally. Firstly, Chapter 6 “Working with literature” provides a solid introduction to the use of children’s literature in ELT in which the authors clearly demonstrate the broader notion of a literary text which extends beyond print books and embraces digital texts, films and drama. Wider educational goals are incorporated alongside linguistic and discursive development such as children’s aesthetics, motivational and cultural competences. The criteria for text selection equip PELT practitioners with an invaluable checklist and the application of a TBLT sequence significantly enhances the familiar ELT “pre-while-post” reading phases. Finally, the suggested activities for text lead-in, comprehension, performance, and creation are all highly useful for PELT classroom experimentation.

Chapter 4 “Managing the language classroom” is logically placed before the focus on the development of children’s English language skills and other competences. This placement reflects the well-known adage in PELT teacher education which asserts that “class management is the backbone of successful teaching.” Unfortunately, unlike the other chapters, this one is less systematic both in terms

of organization and coverage. A significant part draws on Jim Scrivener's work, which is an unusual choice given that he is a teacher trainer known for *adult ELT*, rather than for research in PELT school settings. It would be more advisable then for teacher educators to refer to scholarly and practical work on classroom management in the PELT and pre-primary English fields for congruence with the focal age range (see for example, Mourão & Ellis 2020; Read, 2023, in press; Shin & Crandall, 2014). In addition, Chapter 4 covers classroom language and the importance for PELT practitioners to provide children with good English models. While the desirability of clear language models is widely accepted, this is framed in rather outmoded and native-speakerist terms. The authors state, "their language needs to qualify as natural and everyday examples of English which may be used by native speakers" (p.65). However, to counterbalance this deficit view of the chapter, it has a valuable section on mediation-as-scaffolding which functions to provide children with vital task support when they interact in English (pp.72–76).

In summary, Kolb and Schocker's volume undoubtedly makes an important contribution to the PELT teacher education field in Germany. In this review, I have considered its potential for use beyond its "core" national readership and it is clear that the publication successfully bridges theory and practice and is accessibly presented for student teachers and in-service PELT practitioners. With the proviso that teacher educators supplement the empirical focus and recommended reading with works of relevance to their student teacher and teacher cohorts, this publication would make a welcome addition to any PELT teacher education library.

References

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