



In need of rebranding

Jason Anderson

suggests changing our 'young learners' terminology.

Introduction

It is a curious fact of history that the term 'young learners' is used almost exclusively in the field of English language teaching; it is much more of a concern that it is both ambiguous and decontextualised. This article will argue not only that this is problematic, but that we, as a practitioner community, can benefit from shifting from this rather outdated term, to adopting the age group denominations that are almost universally used outside of ELT to differentiate learners at the three key stages of childhood education around the world; pre-primary, primary, and secondary learners (Ellis, 2014).

A search for the term 'young learners' on any internet search engine returns numerous websites, not on education in general, but almost exclusively on teaching English to children, and it is probably no surprise to the reader that the vast majority of these are commercially-oriented websites, selling us products and services relating to this rapidly growing, multibillion-dollar industry. This finding prompts a number of interesting questions that this article will explore:

1. What are the origins of the term 'young learners'?
2. Why is the term primarily used in English language teaching?

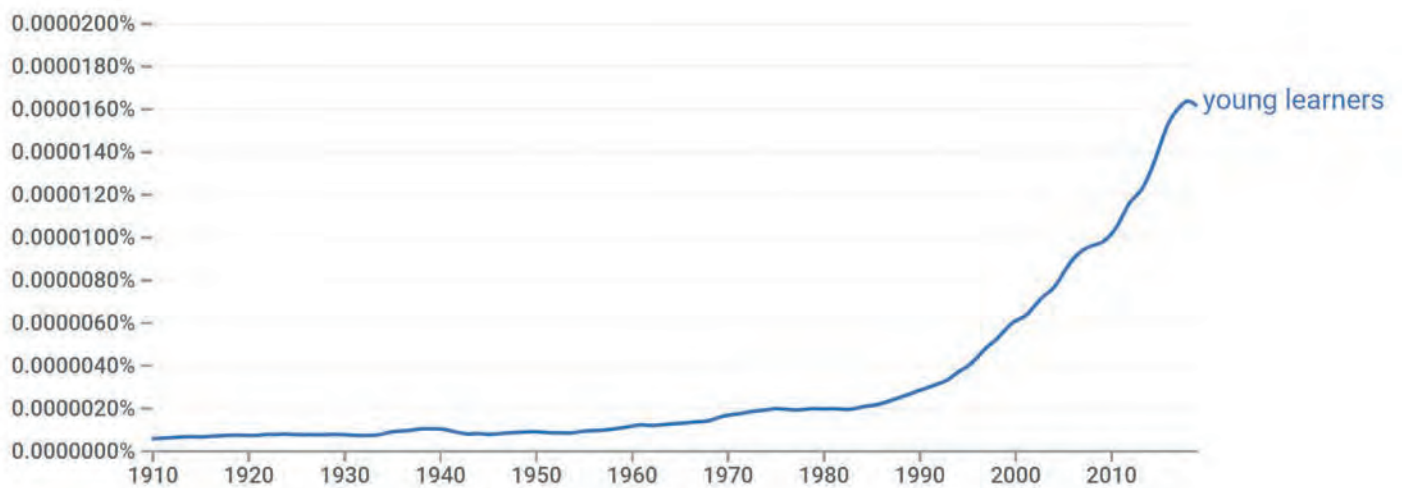


Figure 1: Google N-Gram result for 'young learners'.

3. What alternatives are used in mainstream education, and why?
4. Why might it be important to change our terminology, and why now?

I will also address the counterargument; why it might be useful to retain the term 'young learners', and weigh this up against the argument for change.

The origins of the term 'young learners'

A quick search on Google N-gram Viewer (see Figure 1) tells us something interesting and important about the collocation 'young learners'; its usage increased dramatically with the commercial spread of English around the world during the 1990s, when the term 'swept into fashion', as Read (2011) puts it.

At this time, the term was adopted within the private English language teaching 'industry' (rather than the service provision of mainstream education), initially in the UK, and later worldwide, to refer to child learners, rather than adults. In this sense, such learners were 'younger' than the norm, and typically organised into classes of approximate homogeneity, depending on age, proficiency, or a combination of these. In this sense, 'young learner' was essentially a convenience descriptor, and those of us in the private sector

■ such learners were 'younger' than the norm, and typically organised into classes of approximate homogeneity, depending on age, proficiency, or a combination of these. ■

who were asked to teach such learners often had no appropriate qualifications to teach children. I remember well my first young learner class, which I taught in Ukraine in a private language school in the 1990s; it included children ranging from 8 to 15 years old. It was one of two young learner classes in the school at that time, the other had a similar age range, but lower proficiency in English. Needless to say, I found it difficult to cater for their wide range of developmental needs!

As a result of this origin, as Ellis (2014) notes, ambiguity has plagued the use of the term, with it being used initially to refer to learners under 18, and more recently contrasted with teenage learners or 'teens', when it tends to refer to learners under 13, although there are plenty of exceptions, and little broad agreement.

Why does 'young learners' remain dominant in ELT?

Given that standard alternative terms exist for learner developmental stages, and these typically correspond with the educational systems extant worldwide (discussed below), it is interesting to examine why the term 'young learners' continues to predominate in ELT.

I would like to argue that this dominance results essentially from a specific type of hegemony that exists in our profession as teachers of English worldwide. This hegemony originates in, and relates to, the *Centre—Periphery* distinction that Phillipson made in his seminal work *Linguistic Imperialism* (1992). For Phillipson, the 'Centre' constituted the high-income Anglophone countries, such as the UK, the USA and Australia, and the 'Periphery' was countries to which

ELT was exported, largely to the benefit of Centre interests. While Phillipson's primary concern was with how English played an important role as a tool of coercion in the continued dominance of Anglo-western influences in developing countries, many other types of Centre dominance accompanied the spread of English, such as the erroneous perception that 'native-speaker' teachers of English were better than 'non-native-speaker' teachers, and the less often critically examined yet also erroneous assumption that came packaged with the language – that the most advanced methodology for teaching English also disseminated from the Centre (see Holliday, 1994). This methodology was communicative language teaching in its varied (weak and strong) manifestations, both for adults and children (Howatt, 1984).

At this time, a large number of publications appeared adopting the term 'young learners', written mainly by native-speaker authors (e.g., Phillips, 1993; Reilly & Ward, 1997; Seely, 1988). It is revealing that these authors were, in the main, working in – and directing their publications towards – the relatively constraints-free private sector common both in the centre (e.g., EFL summer schools in the UK) and its satellites. The most obvious of the latter were the private supplementary institutions around the world that typically benefitted from their employment of native-speaker teachers whom they often advertised prominently. Such teachers and writers often had little exposure to, nor awareness of, the multiple curricular and institutional constraints that most primary and secondary teachers faced, meaning that age became the principle marker of such learners. Thus, this term isn't simply a label of convenience, it's also a relic of linguistic imperialism, and we should carefully evaluate whether it serves our best interests if we aim to move towards more multilingual, inclusive approaches in additional language learning.

Alternatives to 'young learners'

In almost all education systems in the world, education is divided into four stages, typically termed pre-primary (or

“ ...this term isn't simply a label of convenience, it's also a relic of linguistic imperialism...”

early childhood), primary (elementary in US English), secondary and tertiary, and while there are small but important differences between when learners move between these stages in different countries, these rarely exceed one year, and as such, are less ambiguous. It is these terms that I, like Ellis (2014), propose that we adopt.

Further, as Ellis notes, they also correspond to broad, if varying and subtle, developmental age groups as learners grow. It's notable that, more recently, the increasing use of the three terms 'very young learners', 'young learners', and 'teens' typically corresponds to these three childhood age groups. So, you might argue that this is an improvement and no further change is required.

A compelling reason to change our terminology

However, there is an even more compelling reason to change these terms. It isn't just about throwing off the yoke of linguistic imperialism, which is, arguably, reason enough. The reality is that the vast majority of English language teachers around the world today work in compulsory education systems, both state-sponsored and private, and this system has an important, undeniable influence (rightly or wrongly) on how we, as teachers, can, and have to, teach. Below are two examples of how these systemic constraints influence diverse aspects of pedagogy, teacher education and curriculum development.

Firstly, in most education systems around the world (China is a notable exception here), primary teachers are generalists; they teach a range

of subjects, and have to develop an extensive pedagogical repertoire as a result. When they teach English as an additional language, they typically do so in ways that reflect their general pedagogical training and often mirrors how they teach other (content) subjects. And while this may not always be in line with the recommendations of research in second language acquisition as to how they *should* teach additional languages, it is an inevitable and important reality of primary education worldwide; primary teachers are not subject-specialists, and those of us who offer materials, training and developmental support to such teachers must remain cognisant of this fact. However, at secondary levels, the majority of teachers are subject specialists, and as such, are more likely to have a stronger affinity with their subject (they often self-identify as *English teachers*), as well as more extensive subject-specific knowledge, and a much higher likelihood of working proficiency in English. This fundamental distinction in teacher expertise and identity constitutes a critical, systemically-dictated difference between the interpersonal and practical experiences of primary and secondary learners of English that we need to acknowledge in our terminology.

Secondly, because in mainstream education learners are nearly always grouped by age, certain realities prevail that may not exist (or, at least, are less marked) in contexts where proficiency level is an equal, or stronger influence on groupings, as often happens in supplementary private language education. The most obvious example of this, a key issue in pedagogy worldwide, is the topic of differentiation; how we support learners at varied ability levels within the same class. This is a key concern of many primary and secondary teachers of English, who frequently experience ability ranges spanning two, three or even four CEFR bands. In contrast to this, in private language school contexts, teachers experience comparatively homogenous classes of 'Pre-intermediate' or 'Upper intermediate' learners, and find less need for differentiation. Given that the majority of early 'experts' on teaching younger learners had taught primarily in

such private school contexts (due to the *Centre—Periphery* inequity discussed above), it is not surprising that the topic of differentiation rarely appears in the early literature on teaching young learners (e.g., Cameron, 2001; Phillips, 1993; Reilly & Ward, 1997), and has only appeared more recently (e.g., Garton & Copland, 2018; Pinter, 2017) as the demand from the increasing number of mainstream teachers seeking guidance in ELT has increased.

Other key differences between mainstream curricular and private supplementary contexts are equally compelling, including issues of assessment and exam washback, national curricular frameworks, the wider pastoral roles of teachers, and issues of accountability. By adopting the terms that recognise the systemic challenges and affordances of the vast majority of teachers of English around the world, we recognise and align ourselves to their challenges, empathise with them, and bring their contexts centre-stage, where, I would argue, they should be.

Addressing the counterargument

There is a counterargument for why we may, at times, find terms such as ‘young/younger learners’ useful, and even contrast these with ‘older [child] learners’, as Pinter (2017) frequently does. This argument relates to the fact that a child’s developmental needs exist independently of, and arguably a priori to, any formal learning environment. Focusing on these needs, and the learner’s related cognitive, affective and psychomotor development, helps us to understand them and thereby to provide support that is better tailored to these needs. It is not difficult to argue that these should (ideally) dictate the nature of the child’s formal learning environments, and not the other way around. Certainly, if the focus of a text or piece of research is on these needs, then the use of the terms (providing they are defined clearly) is justified. However, the moment we begin to discuss ‘teaching young learners’ our attention turns inevitably towards the formal contexts available. And while a small proportion of us, as English language teachers, work in contexts (i.e., private,

By adopting the terms that recognise the systemic challenges and affordances of the vast majority of teachers of English around the world, we recognise and align ourselves to their challenges...

supplementary language schools) where we can be flexible with what, how, and how quickly we teach and assess learning, these decisions (concerning curriculum, syllabus, scheme of work and assessment) are formalised in ways that make them much less amenable for the vast majority of teachers of children.

Importantly, while the proposed terms – pre-primary, primary and secondary learners – make these all-important curricular contexts clear, our adoption of them does not mean we have to side-line our learners’ developmental needs; these are also central to mainstream educational theory, where the proposed terms are widely used.

Conclusion

I am, of course, very much aware of the economic realities of a field (ELT) that typically identifies more as an industry than a profession, and these realities will likely dictate that little will change in the near future as a result of attempts like mine and Ellis’s (2014) to influence terminology, but I believe we can and should reflect critically on the labels that we adopt, because these can be more or less inclusive of practitioners and their realities. And given that it is the vast majority of teachers of children whose often challenging contextual realities the current terminology ignores, I believe the argument for change is compelling: pre-primary learners, primary learners and secondary learners of English will be the ultimate beneficiaries.

References

- Cameron L (2001) *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ellis G (2014) ‘Young learners’: clarifying our terms. *ELT Journal* 68 (1) 75–78.

Garton S & Copland F (Eds) (2018) *The Routledge handbook of teaching English to young learners*. London: Routledge.

Holliday A (1994) *Appropriate methodology and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howatt (1984)

Phillips S (1993) *Young learners*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Phillipson R (1992) *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pinter A (2017) *Teaching younger language learners* (Second edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Read C (2011, July 25) *Y is for young learners*. Carol Read’s ABC of teaching children. Available at: <https://carolread.wordpress.com/2011/07/25/y-is-for-young-learners/>

Reilly V & Ward SM (1997). *Very young learners*. Oxford University Press.

Seely J (1988) *Teaching English to young learners: A handbook for teachers and teacher trainees*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



Jason Anderson is a teacher educator, educational consultant, award-winning author, and researcher, who works in both language teaching and mainstream education. He has supported

teachers in over 30 countries for organisations including UNICEF, the British Council and the University of Warwick, particularly across the Global South, and published widely on areas including multilingualism, teaching methodology, curriculum design, teacher expertise, teacher reflection and lesson planning. Numerous free resources for teachers are available through his website: www.jasonanderson.org.uk