

## **The early bird catches the worm? Rethinking the primary-junior high school transition in EFL learning**

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This article addresses the need to solve problems of primary-junior high school transition and ensure continuity in pedagogical practice between the two social settings. It draws from a one-year socio-cultural study in Taiwan which aims to explore differences in students' access to EFL learning in four Taiwanese junior high schools. Classroom observations were conducted in two classrooms in each school and semi-structured interviews were carried out with students and teachers. Findings reveal overt grammar-oriented classroom pedagogy and consequent heightened classroom control in junior high, as opposed to communicative-based classroom learning in primary schools. Students' access to English followed complex trajectories of identity formation that reflected tensions between their primary school learning histories and subsequent pedagogical experiences in junior high. Learning English was found to be a value-laden practice whose difficulties were exacerbated by the degree of disconnected progression between primary and junior high schools in Taiwan. The study challenges the collective myth of "the earlier the better in learning foreign languages" without consideration of issues of transition between primary and junior high. Implications pertaining to primary-junior high progression in pedagogical practice are discussed which may inform practitioners and policy makers in Taiwan who are concerned with the gap in EFL learning and teaching.

**Keywords:** Transition; identity; EFL; primary level; secondary level; Taiwan

### **Introduction**

In an age of globalisation, English as a foreign language (EFL) is generally assumed to be the pivotal element in global communication. In Taiwanese society, being able to speak English carries considerable prestige and it is generally believed that speaking better English fuels upward mobility in terms of occupation and social status. Official views of economic and international exigency, however, tend to treat the overall decline in entries for EFL learning as disappointing (e.g. Chang, 2002, 2006). There is growing public concern about young Taiwanese people's capacity for communicating across the world.

Learning English is a value-laden practice exacerbated by heightened political pressure to ensure Taiwan's place in the global economy (Lin, 2008). The extension downwards of the provision for learning English from the junior high level to year 5 at the primary level in 2001, and even further to year 3 in 2005 highlighted the economic and political significance of learning English within Taiwanese society. However, it is a matter of concern that national, longitudinal achievement data has consistently demonstrated a substantial gap in English between candidates aged 13 living in different locales (Chang, 2002; Lee, 2002). Official endeavours tend to focus on "macro" aspects, such as "urban-rural" resource discrepancies (Chang, 2002; Chou, 2003; Tse, 2002) and

fail to provide a micro genetic view of the language learning process which examines the complexity of social and psychological forces affecting EFL learning and teaching within classrooms.

Drawn from a Vygotskian inspired socio-cultural study of EFL learning in Taiwan (Lin, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978), this article revisits some of the issues pertaining to the need to solve the discontinuity of primary-junior high transition by problematizing the collective myth of “the earlier the better in learning foreign languages” without consideration of the issues of value asymmetry in pedagogical practice between the two consecutive social organizations. This micro genetic aspect of foreign language learning may help to deepen the scope of our understanding of students’ identity formation in their active “appropriation” (Rogoff, 1995) of classroom pedagogy and culture in the Taiwanese school context. Relevant findings of this Taiwanese study are presented and the disconnected progression in pedagogy between primary and junior high schools which it reveals is examined and discussed.

### **Context of EFL in Taiwan: Locating the problems**

The history of EFL teaching and learning in Taiwan has deep economic and political roots. Since the 1980s Taiwanese society has been subjected to far-reaching, rapid, economic change, and became the world’s fifteenth largest trading country in 2004 (BFT Taiwan, 2004). Learning English in Taiwan has become a major economic concern as industries have acknowledged the need to compete within global markets where trade is mostly carried out in English. The growth in demand for and supply of English language education in business, public sectors and school settings is escalating. For example, the lowering, in recent years, of the age at which English becomes a required school subject reflects public recognition of the importance of EFL learning.

The implementation of the new Grade 1-9 Curriculum in 2001 provided a framework of unified guidelines regulating curriculum goals, pedagogic methods, timetable, content and evaluation. Following these Ministry of Education (MOE) guidelines, English is taught with a focus on the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, and on developing basic communicating competences and knowledge of culture and social customs. The actual pedagogy used at primary schools is therefore generally communicative-based; aiming to incorporate a variety of oral expression such as language games, songs and role plays in seeking children’s learning motives (MOE Taiwan, 2014). However, at junior high level the pedagogy is grammar-oriented, involving an extensive use of drills, rote learning and tests. School cultures at junior high level tend to devalue oral communication, making students feel that the process of learning English is tedious and more difficult than at primary level. As a result, and because of the importance of English proficiency for Senior High school entry, engagement in after-school revision classes in cram schools has become widespread among junior high school students. Lin (2008) points out the usefulness of cram schools for “dealing with the growing complexity and difficulty of English as a subject in junior high school” (p. 93) but he also points out that attendance “does not guarantee students’ academic improvement” (p. 93) because of students’ reluctance to attend and the passivity of pedagogic treatment in cram schools that tend to deter full participation.

The extension of EFL to younger ages in the national curriculum was aimed at responding to a dramatic sense of socio-political change and consciousness of global economic trends (MOE Taiwan, 2014). However, issues of primary-junior high school transition that may account for the demotivation of some students (even though they started learning English early) have been ignored. The extension, though exemplifying

the valuing of early EFL learning, was itself professionally problematic. There is evidence in the research literature of the emerging deficiencies resulting from the discontinuity between primary and junior high school in Taiwan (Chang, 2006; Chen, 2008; Cheng, 2006; Chou, 2002; Hwang, 2005). Chou (2002) identified many problems and a growing debate in education following the implementation of the Grade 1-9 Curriculum in 2001 in primary schools, in particular, “issues regarding primary-junior high school transition” (p. 6). These problems are captured in Hwang’s (2005) study, in which he argued that there is a lack of: consistency as to when it should start; officially sanctioned versions of textbooks; a theoretical basis for downward extension to third-grade and insufficient heed to the warnings of linguistic experts; well-rounded planning of teaching hours, teachers’ qualification and pedagogic materials; establishment of teachers’ training, accreditation and evaluation; and qualified English teachers. Chen’s (2008) investigation of how cultures of EFL learning in classrooms are constructed through classroom discourse in the transitional process from primary to junior high school in Taiwan, found a significant dominance of teachers’ talk and the overall drilling practice and the I-R-F (initiation-response-feedback) discourse pattern, especially in junior high schools. She also argued that there is a lack of proper liaison between schools and teachers in primary and junior high education. Consequently, teachers tend to ignore the importance of the transitional process in helping students deal with change between those educational levels.

Moreover, while for some the increase in hours, from 1-2 hours weekly in primary to 4-5 in junior high schools, does not seem to be welcome. The discontinuity of pedagogy from primary to junior high levels is a serious problem because pedagogy has to be concerned with the relationship between practice and the cultural and historical contexts in which the practice occurs (Wertsch, 1998). Hall and Murphy (2008) point out that pedagogy involves “an appreciation of the significance of experiences and meditational aspects as key to supporting learning” (p. ix). In a similar vein, Wenger (1998) argues that people define who they are by where they have been and where they are heading. Thus, the past and future provide meaning to the present. Individual students’ identity development in language learning processes, therefore, has to be conceptualised as socially, culturally and historically constructed as “self in practice” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) or “identity in practice” (Wenger, 1998). Arguably, students’ histories of participation (Holland et al., 1998) or in Rogoff’s (1995) sense, “participatory appropriation” of their pedagogic experiences in the primary classroom may mediate their ways of knowing as well as learning in the processes of ongoing activities in education. The different pedagogic approaches and values in EFL teaching and learning between the two distinct social settings of primary and junior high appear to bring about problems that may hinder students’ active appropriation of classroom learning in junior high schools.

## **Methods**

This study employed a research design based on socio-cultural theoretical approaches to learning to explore students’ complex trajectories in the process of learning English, with the focus on inquiry into issues of primary-junior high transition. Socio-cultural theory requires a shift from “the individual human mind” as the sole unit of analysis for understanding human thought to recognise socio-culturally constituted practice where human thinking and behaviour develop (Scribner, 1997). Informed by this Vygotsky-inspired formulation, emphasis has been placed on socio-cultural contexts to identify emerging cultural issues concerning value and other particular identities.

Participants were students from four junior high schools (two urban and two rural) in southern Taiwan. This study used multiple methods including classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with students and individual student learner histories. Classroom observations were conducted in two classes in each school thus involving 8 teachers. In total, 28 one-hour sessions were audio-recorded. The semi-structured interviews were carried out in Chinese with 17 students, including lower and higher achievers based on their English performances in school assessments. The purpose of teacher-observations was to clarify interaction and practice in classrooms. The individual students' learning histories were used to uncover their identity development in language learning processes. A number of recognised analytical techniques were used as appropriate with the data. The teacher-student interactions were analysed using certain sensitising categories such as "regulative" and "instructional" discourses as general guidelines to inform analysis (Table 1). Thematic analysis and discourse analysis were both employed as a gradual process of developing interpretation. Transcription conventions (Silverman, 2006) were used to identify pauses, gaps, explanatory asides and untranscribable words in helping to present raw data. Ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity and power relations in the field were taken into account in an attempt to protect participants' identities. All participants' names in this paper are pseudonyms.

Table 1. Categories for classroom observations

Teachers' Questioning Type	
Regulative	Instructional
Housekeeping (e.g., T: Do you bring your books?)	Direct elicitation
Rhetorical (No answer expected)	Cued elicitation (scaffold/ ZPD)
Teachers' Response Type	
Ignoring	Confirmation (e.g., T: Very good)
Rejection	Repetition/ Elaboration

### Findings and discussion

This section uses an extract of the classroom observational data to exemplify the grammar-oriented pedagogy, provides evidence from students' accounts of the tensions caused by the change from primary to junior high school settings, discusses the pedagogical discontinuity and then problematizes the overarching issue.

### **Overall Grammar-oriented Pedagogy**

Classroom observation sessions revealed predominantly “grammar- oriented” classroom pedagogy and its consequent heightened classroom control across all classrooms in the study. This is in contrast to the communicative-based classroom learning in primary schools attested to in participant students’ interview accounts. The following extract from Ms. Sun’s class was typical of all grammar-oriented pedagogy observed in the four schools, where high scores were valued in language exams. Although the target language (English) was used by Ms. Sun for reading vocabulary and dialogue from the textbook, Mandarin became the instructional language used to ensure that students comprehended the meanings of the learning tasks. In her class, Ms. Sun was teaching phrasal items involving words such as “right” and “best” while students were jotting down what had been written on the blackboard. Most of her grammatical delineation and explanation was done in Mandarin (denoted by *italics* in the extract).

Extract 1

(Note: *italics* denotes the use of Mandarin)

- 1 T: *Besides being a noun meaning “right hand side”, “right” can be an*  
 2 *adjective meaning “correct”. [...] or an adverb meaning “right there”.*  
 3 (Writing on board) Right here/ right there.

(Ms. Sun was teaching what had been written on the board while some students were still taking notes silently.)

[...]

(The next few lines were followed by Ms. Sun lecturing about the word “best”)

- 4 T: *It’s an adverb meaning “tzuei”. Write it down! It’s an adjective meaning*  
 5 *“tzuei-hao-de” “the best”. Like “the best students” or “the best class”.*  
 6 So, “best” *has two properties.*

(Teacher turns to the board, writing and talking without a microphone)

- 7 *The first kind- adjective: best means “tzuei-hao-de” “the best”.*  
 8 *But be aware that a prefix “the” has to be attached to “best”....*  
*What does it mean by “the best”?*

9 Ss: Unintelligible (Some students are still taking notes.)

- 10 T: I am the best. We are the best. “the” *must be added to best.*  
 11 *Moreover, “best” is an adverb in the text which means something is*  
 12 *someone’s favourite.*

(Ms. Sun turns to the board writing and talking simultaneously with ascending voice.)

- 13 T: I like baseball best. I like basketball best.  
 14 (Waiting for note-taking) *Have you all done?*  
 15 You are the best student. So, the best *can be added with a noun.*

The teacher was intent on explicitly instructing the class on points of grammar and illustrating them by writing patterns and examples on the board. As can be seen in lines 1 and 2 of Extract 1, the grammatical properties of the new word “right” were elaborated and written on the board for students. The class then moved on to another new word “best”. Besides points of grammar regarding the new word “best”, as shown in lines 4, and 5, the phrase “the best” was also underlined with illustrative sentences (line 10). Ms. Sun then elaborated further by stating a “noun” could be added (line 15). The entire teaching process was carried out by the teacher providing explicit instruction about grammatical rules, along with students’ note-taking. This can be viewed as a form of rote learning, aimed no doubt, at gaining better scores in exams. The grammatical explanation was primarily given in Mandarin and was usually accompanied by the teacher writing on the board and students taking notes quietly. Very little listening or oral practice was observed in the classroom pedagogic process. The extract from Ms.

Sun's class was typical of all grammar-oriented pedagogy observed in the four schools where a rote learning style seemed to be the norm with the goal of achieving satisfactory test scores. This grammar-based pedagogy, which differs greatly from students' past pedagogic experiences in primary classrooms, may diminish their motivation in EFL learning. The following students' accounts reveal the tensions evident in their contrastive learning histories.

### *Emerging Tensions in Students' Learning Histories*

Interview data revealed that individual students' access to English followed complex trajectories of identity formation that often reflected tensions between their primary school learning histories and their subsequent experiences in junior high schools. Both lower achieving students and some high achieving "early birds" who had started learning English earlier in primary school experienced similar tensions in terms of the contrasts between their primary and junior high classroom learning experiences. Among the 17 student interviewees, two lower (Mark and John) and one higher achieving student (Helen), best exemplified psychological conflict in the process of EFL learning.

#### *Mark - the trapped learner*

As a low achieving student learning English in a rural school, Mark was one of the many "trapped" students who were willing but failing to learn English well. The following interview extract highlights Mark's dismay and portrays his learning identity as a trapped learner, still trying to find a way out.

##### Extract 2

- 1 Interviewer: Could you briefly describe your English learning history?
- 2 Mark: I started learning English in Year 6 [...] We were all playing
- 3 most of the time [...] so I could not follow the lesson when I
- 4 attended Year 7 in junior high school.
- 5 Interviewer: Which part did you fail to understand?
- 6 Mark: I could listen [...] but failed to write it out.
- 7 Interviewer: In Year 6, did you learn anything like alphabetic letters?
- 8 [...]
- 8 Mark: Yes, only English letters.
- 9 Interviewer: So you did not follow [...] as long as you were in year 7!
- 10 Mark: Yeah [...] I went to a cram school, but still "did not comprehend" [...] I do not understand grammar and all other stuff [...] even after I have asked questions from former English teachers.
- 11 *ting-bu-dong.*

Mark's learning experiences seemed to point to a fundamental imbalance of pedagogical practice between primary and junior high school level. As he says, "*We were all playing most of the time [...] so I could not follow the lesson when I attended Year 7*" (lines 2 to 4). Consistent with the national Grade 1-9 curriculum in Taiwan, "*playing*" that engenders learning is highly valued in primary schools. However, this is not the case in junior high. As Mark pointed out, he could "*listen*" but "*failed to write it out*" (line 6), representing his feeling that the "play" and communicative-based English practice of his primary years were being denied by junior high school teachers and school culture. Despite attending cram schools for about 2 hours weekly, Mark still failed to understand English because the lessons there are predominantly grammar-based. As he reported; "*I went to cram school, but still did not comprehend*" (line 10)

and consequently withdrew after six months. Moreover, the declaration “*I do not understand grammar and all other stuff [...] even after I have asked questions from former English teachers*” mirrored his troubled situation arising from grammar-based learning.

*John - the disillusioned learner*

John, a low achieving participant in another rural school was one of the many indigenous students who demonstrated initial interest in learning English, displaying a rather more “open-minded” and “curious” attitude than many urban peers. According to Lin’s (2008) socio-cultural study of Taiwanese indigenous students’ EFL learning, some 30% of the indigenous people believe in Western religions, e.g., Christianity, besides their traditional belief in ancestral spirits. He argues that Western religions, in contrast to local Buddhism or Daoism practiced by other urban Taiwanese people, may explain why indigenous students stay more interested in Western culture and the English language than their urban peers. Because of John’s lack of cultural resources in terms of cram school attendance and everyday English practice at home due to living in a remote rural locality, he appeared to encounter difficulties in comprehending grammar in Year 7. The following interview may provide a schematic picture showing why he became a low EFL achiever.

Extract 3

- 1 Interviewer: Could you briefly describe your English learning history?
- 2 John: I started in Year 5 in primary school...
- 3 Interviewer: How do you feel about your learning at that time?
- 4 John: Very happy!
- 5 Interviewer: Can you describe what you were learning?
- 6 John: I cannot remember [...] it was a long time ago.
- 7 Interviewer: It’s fine. Did you have some games or interactive teaching?
- 8 John: Yes, we did.
- 9 Interviewer: Did you like such learning at that time?
- 10 John: Yeah.
- 11 Interviewer: ...any difference between when you started learning and now?
- 12 John: I started to dislike it when I got to Year 7.
- 13 Interviewer: Why is that?
- 14 John: [...] because I did not understand... what is a “verb”...
- 15 Interviewer: You mean grammar and sentence patterns?
- 16 John: Yes.
- 17 Interviewer: Do you have any idea about grammar such as verbs?
- 18 John: They are more difficult to recite [...]
- 19 I can recite it today but will forget it tomorrow...
- 20 Interviewer: Do you have any opportunities to practice English at home?
- 21 John: A little writing...few days before the school exam...
- 22 I will start writing and “reciting hard”!
- 23 Interviewer: Recite vocabulary, sentence patterns and grammar...?
- 24 John: More or less [...] predominantly vocabulary...

As shown in Extract 3 John appeared to have a “*very happy*” (line 4) time learning English in his primary school years and enjoyed learning (lines 9 and 10). The asymmetrical relationship between primary and junior high school practices became clear when he attended the latter; “*I started to dislike it when I got to Year 7*” (line 12) due to more grammar-based learning (lines 15 and 16). John appeared to feel chained to,

but failed to learn, vocabulary and grammar by rote, feeling that English grammar is “*more difficult to recite*” (line 18). His only English practice at home was to recite “*vocabulary*” (line 24) a few days before the school exam by “*writing and reciting hard*” (line 22) as a basic effort to secure minimum scores on the vocabulary test.

#### *Helen- the early bird*

Another participant, Helen, a high achieving student in learning English in an urban bilingual school, experienced similar tension imbued with value conflict at junior high school. In contrast to Mark’s learning trajectory, Helen appeared to have rich cultural resources in her locality, including parental engagement and a school whose official vision was the promotion of bilingualism. However, she was deterred by the English practices at school where she felt that English was not as real and as much fun as in the past because there were no foreign teachers and no real-life English conversations in class. What was taught was mainly grammar-oriented, both at school and cram school. Helen expressed her dissatisfaction by saying; “*I feel that, though we have English signs [...] which may help a bit, it is not an authentic whole English environment*”.

Helen’s experience of real-life English learning with a foreign teacher in her early primary school years left her caught in tensions between her past learning history and present school discourse. Though one of the tensions resided in her understanding of the constraints and limitations of school bilingual practice, discontinuity with her personal, foreign teacher experience appeared to be at the heart of her conflict. Her experience and understanding of authentic English was linked to her desire for more active participation whereby, as she put it, “*We have English signs but they do not talk*”. This revealed her longing for an active English spoken environment which was, indeed, not possible in most junior high schools in Taiwan.

#### ***Pedagogical Discontinuity as Value Asymmetry***

Davies (1994) argued that “pedagogy involves a vision (theory, set of beliefs) about society, human nature, knowledge and production, in relation to educational ends, with terms and rules inserted as to the practical and mundane means of their realization” (Davies, 1994, p. 26). Thus, in the everyday, situated practice of EFL classroom learning and teaching, attention must be paid to pedagogic practice which means the specific ways that teachers instruct students have to be taken into consideration. Moreover, broader levels of political issues that regulate pedagogic practice have also to be considered. For instance, the educational objectives that school visions privilege, national curriculum requirements and the outworking of notions of economic, social and cultural driving forces embedded in notions of national interest. Vygotsky also provided an emergent, sociological account of pedagogy underlining not only its importance as socially meaningful, but also pointing out its value-laden nature. He pointed out that “pedagogy is never and was never politically indifferent,...it has always adopted a particular social pattern, political line, in accordance with the dominant social class that has guided its interests” (Vygotsky, 1997, cited in Daniels, 2001, p. 5).

Given these situated notions of classroom pedagogic practice and value inherent with pedagogic instruction, it is not surprising to find the prevailing grammar-oriented pedagogy across the four case junior high schools within Taiwanese society where competitive culture is the norm. Pedagogic approaches in junior high settings favour heavy reliance on grammar and sentence structure, entailing endless, mechanical drills and assessments. However, what is more intriguing is the emerging pedagogical



discontinuity between two educational sectors that may account for some students' demotivation in EFL learning. In Chen's (2008) study, an English teacher pointed out that "in terms of English language education, elementary school teachers should play the role of transmitting the joy of learning English and help students to enhance their interest in learning it rather than make students feel scared of English and of learning the language" (p. 141). This suggests that EFL learning and teaching in primary schools are interactively oriented, focussing on oral expression and incorporating lively activities such as language games, songs and role play in seeking students' interest. This contrasts with the textbook and grammar-based learning of the junior high level.

As a result, school cultures at junior high level tend to devalue oral communication, while over-valuing recitation and grammar, making students feel that the process is tedious and learning English more difficult than at primary level. In Mark's words, at primary school "*We were all playing most of the time*"; playing while learning English, aiming to engender interest in learning is highly valued in primary schooling. However, such lively practices seem to be devalued by both classroom teachers and students in junior high schools where written English (e.g., grammar-translation methods and written exams), is distinctly privileged. As illustrated in Extract 1, "grammar rules" involving discrete linguistic patterns are chiefly taught and highly valued in junior high classrooms. Given little time for oral practice, junior high students engaged in learning English primarily by rote and were constantly evaluated in order to test their linguistic knowledge and competence.

The following account exemplified the inferior status of oral English, as perceived by students, rather than teachers. Dismayed by her students' reluctance, one of the participant English teachers in Mark's school complained that:

*I am often provided with free sample GEPT [General English Proficiency Test] magazines with CDs from publishers which I like to give out to students [...] I told them not to feel under pressure [...] Some students will try it for fun but some will not because they fear the difficulties.*

Even though the teacher perceived the importance of both oral and written English practice and had tried to bridge the gap between them she revealed that; "*I tried very hard indeed*", even stating their market value, "*They cost two hundred dollars [...] take them if you are willing to try*". Students' passive response and hesitation usually disappointed her, inducing her to speculate that maybe English was viewed by students as synonymous with written tests, leading to their rejection of free audio-lingual English materials. The low status of oral practice in junior high schools, arguably, may be depicted as a social taboo (de Abreu, 1995) in that it regulates pedagogical practice and defines classroom culture.

### ***Problematizing "The early bird catches the worms"***

The implementation of the new Grade 1-9 Curriculum in Taiwan was in response to a sense of economic change and consciousness of global trends, and intended to foster national competitiveness in the world community. However, the official decision to implement a primary school "Early EFL Learning" policy in the national curriculum, arguably, was based on the common sense belief that "the earlier the better" in learning foreign languages (Chou, 2002; Lin, 2008).

Such "early bird" assumptions were neither debated nor discussed but merely taken for granted without considering the continuity between educational levels. In the present

study, Mark, John and Helen's learning trajectories demonstrated a fundamental imbalance of pedagogical practice between two social organisations where the highly-valued communicative-based approaches of primary school teachers were eventually denied by junior high classroom teachers in favour of a broader Taiwanese school culture where discrete, cognitive competence is exceedingly valued. It could be argued that each learner encountered a tension between past learning histories and present junior high schooling which appeared to be at the heart of their inner conflict. Such conflict may, arguably, hinder students' EFL learning particularly when they fail to have access to certain "cultural tools" (Wertsch, 1998) or cultural resources, such as the dedication of urban schools to achieve bilingual aims or appropriate family resources.

### **Conclusions and suggestions**

This paper problematizes the taken-for-granted "early-bird" assumption and the gap in students' EFL learning between primary and junior high schools by looking at four junior high schools in Taiwan. Findings reveal that learning English in primary schools was predominantly through a communicative-based approach whereas in junior high schools it was predominantly grammar-based, with consequent, heightened classroom control. EFL learning was found to be a value-laden practice whose difficulties were exacerbated by the degree of disconnected progression, in particular, the value asymmetry in pedagogical practice between two educational sectors in Taiwan. The gap between the two social organizations caused primary school "early birds" to encounter difficulties within the contrasting junior high classroom learning culture.

Practitioners and policy makers should be aware that although early EFL learning may expect to be privileged in the national curriculum with an extension of its starting point from junior high to successively earlier points in primary schools, its position is often embroiled in tensions about what to learn, when to start and, most importantly, which pedagogical approaches to use. It can be argued that if junior high students encounter difficulties in EFL learning, even to the extent of rejection, it may not be because they do not know about the importance of their present learning but because their previous experiences of learning are positioned as low status in the junior high classroom pedagogical practice.

Given the notion of mutual construction of learning or appropriation (Rogoff, 1995) of classroom pedagogy, this study suggests that teachers in the junior high sector should be aware that overtly didactic approaches, placing grammar teaching and writing practice predominantly at centre stage, may lead to devaluing of other important language skills (e.g., listening and speaking) by either teachers or students. In contrast, classroom teachers in the primary sector should be aware of the inevitability of a more didactic approach in junior high schooling as students' capacity for comprehending linguistic structure matures and of the exigencies of sitting the National Basic Competence (NBC) Test in year 9 where grammatical competence is evaluated. Given the relative flexibility in primary curriculum content, time, pacing and balance, the early and everyday practice of all four language skills will, arguably, help to achieve mutual structuring of meanings between teachers and students in future junior high school classrooms.

### **About the author**

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