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Early foreign language teaching in Germany: Recent political and curricular developments

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Abstract

As in other educational systems throughout the world (Hayes 2022; Enever 2018), early foreign language learning – mostly English – has gained importance in Germany. Thus, the teaching of an additional language has been mandatory in German primary schools since 2004. Nevertheless, debates persist over its role and suitable teaching approaches as well as appropriate educational policies. These are mirrored in each of the 16 federal states' curricula. For this study, document analyses were employed to examine changes in the German Primary English Language Teaching (PELT) curricula since 2015 with consideration of recent political developments and their potential consequences for classroom practices. Special focus is placed on the documents from Baden-Württemberg (BW) and North Rhine-Westphalia (NW) as these underwent the most substantial changes. In addition, PELT coursebooks were analysed to assess the extent to which political developments may have caused modifications in teaching materials. We close with implications for primary language education that also extend to other countries and contexts.

Keywords: curriculum development, document review, early ELT, institutional foreign, language education, literacy acquisition, text and media competence



Introduction

In Germany, education is mainly the task of the federal states (Wilden & Porsch, 2017, p. 60), which means that each of the 16 states has its own school system, own curriculum, and own educational policies. In contrast to secondary English education, national education standards have not been developed by the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German Länder (KMK) for PELT (Elsner 2018: 21f.). Thus, the curricula provide conceptional structures and standards for PELT. Since the compulsory introduction of one foreign language (FL) in primary school in all 16 federal states of Germany in the school year 2004/05, there have been ongoing debates about teaching approaches that are reflected in the political and curricular situations in each state. Mirroring the situation in many other countries (e.g. Holmes & Tellier, 2022; Terawasa, 2022), debates like this have included the themes, topics, competences, and language features to be dealt with, the implementation of research findings in PELT, and the transformations caused by curricular changes.

This research is a continuation of a survey in 2015 that took stock of the diversity and heterogeneity of the practices of PELT in the 16 German federal states on the one hand and which identified issues to be addressed in the future on the other hand (Hempel, Kötter, & Rymarczyk, 2017; Hempel, Kötter, Rymarczyk, & Steinlen, 2017). Now, several years later, we continue our research as PELT is increasingly under attack since a greater support of German literacy skills and Mathematics is needed, and the time for this is to be taken from PELT (cf. e.g. the discussion in Wilden & Porsch, 2020). Furthermore, empirical studies into PELT have shown that an earlier start is not automatically better but that the 'how' of early language instruction matters (Piske, 2017; Roskita-Jaśkow & Ellis 2019). Hence it is vital to examine the most recent developments in this field, i.e. update the empirical analysis of the respective curricular documents and teaching materials as the basis to the practical implementation of PELT. Although set in the specific context of Germany, this exemplary analysis also contributes to a general understanding of the interplay between educational policies and practices as well as the variability of (early) language learning programmes. The curricula in Germany provide the framework for the requirements of the respective school subjects, whereas the coursebook materials reflect the degree of implementation of the conceptional structures transferred to topic units. While our empirical study focusses on the situation in Germany, the value and importance of systematically analysing curricular documents and teaching materials holds true internationally. Numerous studies have been carried out in other countries with a similar intention. For curricular developments/analyses see Enever (2018), Hayes (2022), Holmes and Tellier (2022), or Terasawa (2022), and for textbook analyses Álvarez and Catalán (2022), Butler et al. (2018), or Joo et al. (2020). The common tenor clearly states that early language learning policies as a worldwide phenomenon, including curricular alterations in primary education, need to be informed by current research to meet the proliferation of PELT at an international level. We adopt the stance taken by Zein and Garton (2019) who do not regard "global cultures as fusing into one global identity" (Zein, 2019, p. 5) but instead follow a local variability approach in which PELT curricular developments are understood "as an international concern with complexities across countries and continents [that are] also context bound" (ibid.). Due to this perspective, we investigate the current German situation, drawing from the particular contexts of the two federal states of NW and BW which have undergone the most comprehensive curricular changes.

Theoretical Background

Since this research examines developments and innovations in current curricula and practice in PELT based on our previous work (Hempel, Kötter, & Rymarczyk, 2017; Hempel, Kötter, Rymarczyk, & Steinlen, 2017), it employs the method of document review as a means of collecting qualitative data. Thus, it elaborates on previous and recent versions of the curricula of the federal states and newly published coursebook materials. Research like this, on institutional documents – e.g. curricula –, is useful for tracing

processes relating to education and it sheds light on educational policy making (McCulloch, 2011, p. 248; Hayes, 2022, p. 48f.). While the official documents provide conceptional structures for teaching, they only allow to draw tentative conclusions about the actual teaching situation at school (Kolb & Klippel, 2016, p. 124). By contrast, coursebook materials reflect the degree of implementation of the structures transferred to topic units with activities, tasks and methodological guidelines (Kolb & Schocker, 2021, p. 196). Before coursebooks can be published in Germany, however, they must be approved by the respective state ministries. The most important basis for the approval procedure for both analog and digital learning materials in NW, for example, is the ministerial decree „Zulassung von Lernmitteln“ (Approval of learning materials) (MSB-NW 2003). An approval procedure for a learning aid therefore always begins with a publisher's application for approval of the learning aid. Coursebooks must always comply with the curricular guidelines, syllabi and teaching specifications of the respective federal state, provide learning opportunities, and be up to date with the state of the art in the academic discipline and compatible with the legal requirements. Because of the approval procedures by the respective educational ministries, many teachers regard them as a realization of the federal state's curriculum (Rückl, 2018, p. 171; Thaler, 2011, p. 15). Moreover, in the primary classroom, coursebooks are very often followed step by step as suggested in the corresponding teachers' manuals also referred to as teacher's books (Vollmuth, 2003, p. 82). Thus, the analysis of samples of coursebook materials from BW and NW provides research evidence underpinned by practical up-to-date references.

Research Aims and Methodology

Research Aims

In most federal states, early foreign language learning means learning English. As mentioned above, there are still no national standards for PELT in Germany. Thus, each one of the states can adopt its own legislation in the educational sector and take individual measures to increase or guarantee the quality of PELT which become manifested in the curricula. There exist 16 different curricula with considerable varieties regarding content, objectives and methodology. This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: Which changes have been made in administrative documents relevant for PELT since 2015?

As coursebooks are geared to the individual curriculum of each state, this heterogeneity should also be reflected in the different versions of coursebooks. This leads to our second research question:

RQ 2: To what extent have the changes in the PELT curricula of the 16 German federal states affected or been incorporated in new teaching materials?

To answer these questions, this article will present results of document reviews of German PELT curricula and their implementations in coursebook materials.

Methodology

The document reviews were conducted according to Bowen (2009). For the content analysis, the document data was categorised into themes in order to identify recurrent ideas. It was also looked into connections and patterns across the documents, in order to illuminate broader insights into current changes within PELT in Germany. At three levels, the analysis moved from a wider perspective to a more specific one (DR1 – DR3).

At the highest level, the first document review (DR1) investigated the curricula of all 16 federal states with regard to RQ 1: Which changes have been made in administrative documents relevant for PELT since 2015? Further questions scrutinized whether there was a revised version of the existing curriculum regarding administrative issues, like, e.g., allocated time per week as seen in Malaysia (Hayes 2022, p. 98) or subject-specific requirements like, e.g, development of certain skills, targets or methodology as seen

in South Korea (Hayes 2022, p.49). It was also asked whether there a new curriculum or new type of curriculum (e.g. subject vs. framework curriculum) considering these issues. For a better overview, the 16 curricula were categorised into four types (see below in 4.1).

Then, at the second, more specific level, we conducted a closer analysis of the curricula with the most fundamental changes and developments in the light of RQ 1. Since BW and NW turned out to be the states with the most far-reaching curricular changes for PELT (Year 1 start back to a start in Year 3; change in allocated time per week) their curricula were analysed in detail (DR2).

Finally, a third document review (DR3) was conducted, investigating coursebook materials from BW and NW. Here we assessed to what extent the developments had led to concrete modifications in the design, contents and structure of the coursebooks as well as the teaching objectives to be pursued with these materials (RQ 2).

Results: Document Reviews 1-3

Document review 1 (DR1): Analysis of the curricula in the 16 German federal states

Due to differences in the regional legislation in Germany, there are several different types of curricula. In this study, they were first into four types:

Type 1 is the curriculum for regular EFL learning as the curricular subject PELT. It covers either Grades 1-4 or 3-4 or 1-6 in primary school and outlines exclusively the requirements for the subject English.

Type 2 is the curriculum for the subject "Foreign Language" or "Foreign Languages". It also covers Grades 3-4 in primary school and outlines either requirements for an umbrella concept of "Foreign Language" or a concept of "Foreign Languages" with a special focus on individual languages.

Type 3 is the common framework curriculum. It is a comprehensive and integrated educational concept that covers all grades from Grades 1-10 and all subjects, including a special focus on learners with specific educational needs. Thus, this framework curriculum outlines what students must learn – within the respective subjects as well as across disciplines. It applies to all school levels and all school types up to Grade 10.

Type 4 is the framework curriculum for FLT. It is a comprehensive concept for teaching one and more foreign languages from Grades 1-10.

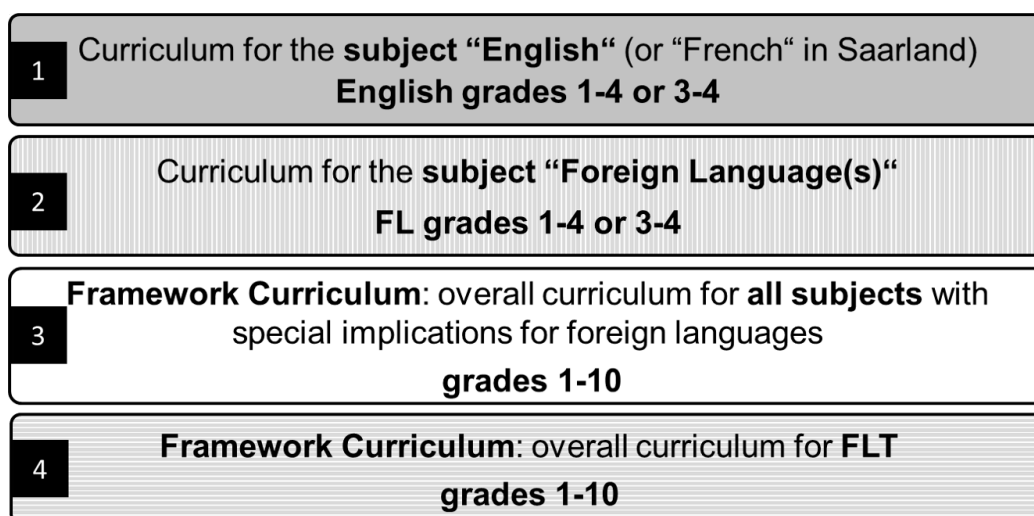


Figure 1 Different types of curricula

In the next step, the curricula of the federal states were sorted into the following three categories due to their level of revision: Category 1: No Change, Category 2: Adaptations, and Category 3: New EFL Curricula.

As can be seen in Figure 2, there are seven states that have not changed their curricula since 2015 at all, whereas nine states have. Five of those have adapted existing curricula and four have developed new curricula.

NO CHANGES	ADAPTATIONS	NEW EFL-CURRICULA
Bavaria (BY) <i>Lehrplan PLUS Bayern 2014</i>	Berlin (BE) <i>Rahmenlehrplan 1-10 2015</i>	Baden-Württemberg (BW) 2020
Bremen (HB) <i>Bildungsplan für das Fach Englisch 2013</i>	Brandenburg (BB) <i>Rahmenlehrplan 1-10 2015</i>	North Rhine-Westfalia (NW) 2021
Hesse (HE) <i>Kerncurriculum Moderne Fremdsprachen 2011</i>	Hamburg (HH) <i>Lehrplan Englisch 2011; supplemented by Allgemeiner Bildungsplan 2018</i>	Lower Saxony (NS) 2018
Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania (MV) <i>Rahmenplan Fremdsprachen 2007/2008</i>	Saxony (SN) <i>Lehrplan Englisch 2004/2009 Revision in 2019</i>	Schleswig-Holstein (SH) 2018
Rhineland-Palatinate (RP) <i>Rahmenplan Fremdsprache 2004</i>	Saxony-Anhalt (SA) <i>Fachlehrplan Englisch Adaptation 2019</i>	
Saarland (SL) <i>Lehrplan Französisch 2011</i>		
Thuringia (TH) <i>Lehrplan Fremdsprachen 2010</i>		

Figure 2 Categories 1-3 of changes in Germany's 16 curricula since 2015

The states of Berlin (BE) and Brandenburg (BB), e.g., integrated the subject English at primary level into a new framework curriculum that covers all subjects on a cross-curricular basis from Grades 1-10 (BSBF-BE, 2015; MBS-BB, 2015). As the framework curriculum includes lists of obligatory topics and themes, such as multilingualism, gender, diversity, sustainability, and inclusion, this means that the contents taught in the different grades can now be better coordinated and aligned with each other. This also applies for language learning competence and media literacy. Thus, a holistic concept from Grades 1-10 has been established that guarantees a smooth transition from primary to secondary level school and recognizes that teaching a foreign language at primary level is integrated with teaching at subsequent grades and other subjects (Hayes, 2022, p. 18) (see also Section 4.3.2 for further continuities in this regard).

The state of Hamburg (HH) has created a combination by supplementing the original English subject curriculum PELT¹ (BSBH-HH, 2011) with a framework curriculum for primary school (BSBH-HH, 2018). This

1 From this point on, for ease of reading, English translations are used without their original German wordings.

framework curriculum shows an increased emphasis on working with text, correctness in writing and language learning competences for all subjects (BSBH-HH, 2018, pp. 6) on a cross-curricular level as well. Complex competency tasks are also part of the requirement.

The state of Saxony-Anhalt (SA) has complemented the original English subject curriculum (MBSA-SA, 2007) with additions concerning text and media competence (MBSA-SA, 2019 Adaptation). Text and media competence (TMC) is thus moved into the foreground. Digital and non-digital media are supposed to provide rich and authentic language input through a variety of text forms such as written or spoken, audio-visual, linear, and non-linear texts (MBSA-SA, 2019, p. 2). Students should be enabled to decode and create texts as well as messages in and with different media and text types (MBSA-SA, 2019, pp. 4-7).

The current curriculum of the state of Saxony (SN) (SSK-SN, 2019), in turn, consists of three different parts: excerpts of its predecessor from 2004, defining the teaching goals (SSK-SN, 2004), are combined with two versions, one from 2009 (SSK-SN, 2009, p. III) and one from 2019 (SSK-SN, 2019), providing a revision of the content (SSK-SN, 2019, pp. IV, VI-27). Also, there is a preamble that spells out teaching goals for primary school in general followed by very detailed descriptions specifically for PELT regarding content, topics, linguistic features, and communicative strategies. The more general part of the curriculum shows an increased emphasis on language learning competences (SSK-SN, 2019, p. IV) on a cross-curricular level. Thus, while the oral skills are still at the centre of FL-teaching, digital media and media competence are included in both the general and specific FL-guidelines (e.g. SSK-SN, 2019, pp. VIII, 8-10).

One of the most striking changes, however, has taken place in the states of BW and NW. These states have raised the compulsory starting year of learning the first FL from Grade 1 to Grade 3.² This shift has had a knock-on effect on the number of hours taught per week and teaching materials. Evidently, the changes and adjustments are different in each state. But they nevertheless have four tendencies in common. These will be the subject of the next few sections.

Skill-related developments in the curricula

It is obvious that there are curricular developments regarding the status and role of the four basic language skills. Whereas the oral skills used to be at the heart of PELT, reading and writing have gradually gained ground, too. According to the current curricula, students are supposed to learn to use English for active participation from the beginning, including reading and writing texts from day one (e.g. BB, BE). They are supposed to learn to understand spoken language, to read and write texts, to learn to hold conversations, to ask questions, and to express and explain opinions orally and in writing (functional communicative competence). In addition, they are expected to gradually become able to recognise specific attributes of media and use them in the production of their own texts (TMC). Thus, the focus of PELT is on communication and on the use of the FL in meaningful contexts and for meaningful purposes, i.e. on “functional communicative competence” (MSB-NW, 2021, p. 43; MBSJ-BB, 2015, p. 26). The focus lies on discourse rather than imitation, as was previously the case, although imitation is still considered to be an important step on the way towards automatization. A citation from the guidelines of Schleswig-Holstein illustrates this point very clearly. Under the heading “Speaking – Coherent Speaking” the two successive levels of development are mentioned: “Pupils communicate coherently in familiar situations after preparation using formulaic phrases or, possibly, independently constructed simple sentences” (MBWKSH-SH 2018: 12).

The same is true for writing. The regulations for primary level of the Federal State of Berlin, e.g., list eight levels for functional communicative competence in writing of which Level 4 and 5 are relevant for the aspect discussed here. While Level 4 states that short, *prepared* texts [italics by the authors of this

2 Currently, PELT starts in Year 3 in all federal states with the exception of HH and RP (start in Year 1) and of SL (start in Year 5 due to French as the first FL in Year 3).

chapter] on everyday topics should be written using simple, familiar language, the competence at Level 5 says that students are able to write short, *coherent* texts [italics by the authors of this chapter] on everyday topics using familiar language (MBJS-BB 2015, no page). So, from the onset, the key focus is on conveying meaning and on the learners' realisations of their communicative intentions (e.g. MSB-NW, 2021, p. 37). Thus, the emphasis is on speaking and writing cohesive and coherent texts rather than merely on using single words or chunks.

Developments with regard to text and media competences (TMC)

A second area that has gained importance are abilities related to dealing with texts and media. Since language is supposed to be used in meaningful contexts and for meaningful purposes, the learners must understand, process and use the information they receive through oral and written texts. With the new curricula published in BW in 2020 and in NW in 2021 (MKJS-BW, 2020; MSW-NW, 2021) in particular, a stronger emphasis is placed on literacy. There is a noticeable trend towards including more reading and writing activities at earlier stages in the learning process, although some German curricula, for example the curriculum for English in SN, note that young EFL-learners should merely be able to cognize written words which they already know (SSK-SN, 2019, p. 2). However, the general drift clearly moves towards gradually fostering students' TMC to enable them to decode and create messages in and with different media and text types. The notion of text in this context incorporates electronic as well as printed or spoken language and texts arranged in both linear and non-linear fashion (e.g. NKM-NS, 2018, p. 10, MBWK-SH, 2018, p 9).

Language awareness-related developments

A third significant trend in the development of PELT curricula concerns attention and awareness with respect to target language features. While communicative competence is still at the heart of PELT, there is a steadily increasing focus on form and accuracy and thus on language awareness both regarding oral and written language (Nassaji 2017). It seems noteworthy that this theme is one that can be easily linked to changes in curricula that have been made more broadly in foreign language education throughout the world. Furthermore, increased attention to form and language awareness cannot only be found in regular PELT contexts but also in primary schools with bilingual programmes. Results of current research into minority and majority language children's reading and writing skills in regular and bilingual immersion programmes recommend literacy-rich classrooms, scaffolding to support students in their reading and writing processes, and awareness-raising activities (Steinlen 2021:133). According to results like this, teachers are supposed to draw their students' attention to specific features of language, however, always embedded in communicative situations, i.e. authentic and relevant contexts (ibid.). Various curricula comply with these ideas and emphasise, that on the one hand, the students' focus should be drawn to orthography (e.g. HH, BW). On the other hand, they should contrast and compare their first language/ German to English in regard to pronunciation, written language and syntax (e.g. NW). This is assumed to enable students not only to learn to notice how language is used in different situations, but also to develop language learning strategies such as discovering features of the linguistic system of the FL and deducing rules. In addition to this, students are encouraged to reflect about different languages to develop their language awareness.

Language learning-related developments

A fourth recent development concerns language learning-related competences. The students are supposed to be familiarized with methods and strategies to support learning English in class, such as applying listening comprehension strategies, reading techniques and strategies, and writing strategies (e.g. NKM-NS, 2018, p. 10). Moreover, there is an increased tendency to invite and to support the learners

to reflect on their own language learning processes and to put their respective individual progress into words (MSB-NW, 2021, p. 42). To paraphrase the words of the curriculum developers from NW, they experience how they can learn a FL and what helps them in the process of doing so (MSB-NW, 2021). These tendencies are in line with language awareness strategy instruction and training in the broader field of foreign language teaching and learning. Especially in the context of multilingualism, a field which keeps gaining more attention due to global migration processes, fostering students' crosslinguistic awareness, a specific variety of language awareness, may support more efficient classroom learning and teaching for young learners (Muñoz 2017: 50). To be able to reflect upon similarities and differences across languages can help develop students' awareness of language learning, or as Muñoz puts it "metalinguistic awareness (knowing about knowing, learning about learning)" (ibid.).

In sum, there is a consensus that learning English in the primary classroom should become more complex and abstract, and it can be seen that through curricular changes like the ones described above it has become more demanding as compared to the years before.

Document review 2 (DR 2): Examples of new curricula and new approaches

Since 2015, BW and NW, two of the largest German federal states, have decided to raise the compulsory starting year of learning the first FL from Grade 1 to Grade 3. In BW, this change took effect from school year 2020/21. In NW, the new rules apply from school year 2023/24. As BW and NW have thus made the greatest changes to their curricula – as no other state has gone as far as to enforce such radical alterations, we decided to analyse the new curricula for these states in more detail in our second document review. The analyses carried out for this purpose reveal that the field of written text production is an area of major changes in these states. But there were also somewhat different emphases in other curricular areas. In the sub-sections of Sections 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 below, we discuss what seem to us to be the most relevant modifications in the new curricular guidelines in BW and in NW.

Document review 2 BW:

Written text production & issues of social and environmental nature

Written text production

The first curricular development which brought fundamental changes for PELT in the federal state of BW can be located in the transition from the *English subject curriculum Primary Level* (MKJS-BW, 2004) to the subsequent curriculum implemented in 2016 (MKJS-BW, 2016). Whereas, according to the curriculum from 2004, the first two years of PELT-lessons were to focus exclusively on developing the oral skills, in 2016 teaching reading and writing also found their way into the FL-classroom (MKJS-BW, 2016). Although this required far-reaching reorientations in the way EFL was taught and learned, the focus of this document review is on the latest version, the supplement to the curriculum from 2016 (MKJS-BW, 2020).

In the 2016 curriculum, general educational goals are taken up in interdisciplinary guiding principles and put in concrete terms in the various subject curricula. The PELT-curriculum 2020 supplement includes four of them:

- Education for tolerance and acceptance of diversity
- Prevention and health promotion
- Media education
- Consumer education (MKJS-BW, 2020, pp. 3-4)

The prominent role of written text production becomes apparent in the supplement as writing is mentioned as the only means to implement the first guiding principle from the list quoted above. As an

example, contacts in the form of text messages and/or e-mail exchanges with partner classes abroad are mentioned. Numerous additional references of this type in various parts of the curriculum underline the prominence of writing further: Similar to the curriculum version from 2016, using written language as a mnemonic is, for example, referred to as a process-related competence (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 9), and under the heading “Content-related competencies (sub-competencies and impulses)”, it is asked in which way children can be offered individually needed words (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 13). It is especially this issue which emphasizes the relevance of writing as it enables the children to express their personal thoughts in an autonomous way. While there is certainly a common set of lexical items to be learned, freedom of choice about new lexis to make individuality possible is emphasized (“In which way can the children be offered individually needed words? – “offered”) [sic] rather than *taught*) (MKJS-BW, 2020). Here, the lexical choice of “offered” over “taught” is to be noted as it signals the non-binding nature of the vocabulary. There is no obligation for the students to learn the respective lexis.

The clearest indicator of a more demanding approach to writing in BW in the curriculum version of 2020, however, is the elimination of the foremost structural question of what words were suitable for writing (MKJS-BW, 2016, p. 14). Instead, an approach based on real world relevance has been chosen that asks what occasions, topics, and events lend themselves to motivating children to write (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 13). A further child-oriented approach can be seen with respect to the question of what support children need to present their work (MKJS-BW, 2020). So, while the cognitive demands of writing have been raised, the teaching of writing also follows a more child-appropriate and playful approach.

A slight indication of which form of support is to be employed is the suggestion to use media (picture dictionaries with talking pens) to look up written forms and listen to the oral equivalents (MKJS-BW, 2020). It is based on the former, much shorter instruction “Use tools for reference” (MKJS-BW, 2016, p. 19), which might have led to a dominance of dictionaries at this point and a disregard for pronunciation. Added emphasis of a joint focus on the written and the oral form, in contrast, enables the learners to gain insights into phoneme-grapheme-correspondences and hence a clearer understanding of the Phonics Approach (see also Section 4.3.3 below). Again, what seems to be a higher demand due to its greater scope, also allows the young learners to act in a self-determined way, i.e. not to necessarily choose the combination of the written and the spoken form but to stay at the oral level a bit longer.

Issues of social and environmental nature

As already mentioned above, “Education for tolerance and acceptance of diversity” is listed as the first guiding principle of PELT (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 3). With the overarching aim of cultural competence and, more precisely, referring to sociocultural and intercultural competence, the following cross-curricular contents are listed: forms of prejudice, stereotypes, clichés; personal and social diversity; tolerance, solidarity, inclusion, and anti-discrimination (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 16). They are to be connected with aspects as diverse as, for example, the children’s first languages and/or specifics of the target cultures that the children encounter in stories, picture books, games, and songs (MKJS-BW, 2020). The common denominator in this field, however, is the recognition of selected specifics of the target cultures and their comparison with the learners’ respective surroundings. This also includes forms of intercultural and interreligious dialogue as another shaping of the guiding principle “Education for tolerance and acceptance of diversity” (MKJS-BW, 2020). These tendencies are in line with, e.g., the component of “(G)rowing into cultural diversity and language awareness” of the Finish core curriculum (Hayes, 2022, p. 131), although there are developments to progress beyond the prioritisation of English and to recognize and develop proficiency in multiple languages (Hayes, 2022, p. 134).

Another cross-curricular development tendency focuses on environmental issues. In the context of speech production, for example, there is the aim that children can use familiar chunks and phrases to talk about people, animals, places, things, and conditions (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 12). The corresponding requirement asks for age-appropriate and differentiated speaking opportunities that can help the children

to make themselves understood (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 11). At this point, the curriculum refers to other subjects like, for example, Arts and Crafts with the topic “Children perceive their environment” and Biology (here: the German subject *Sachunterricht*) with the topic “Animals and plants in their habitats” (MKJS-BW, 2020, p. 12). Summing up the main tendency here, it can be stated that scenarios should be created that pick up on the children’s interests by addressing age-appropriate content. Topics of a social and environmental nature appear to be more promising in this respect than the sole emphasis on thematic fields like “wild animals” or “body parts” in former curricula.

Document review 2 NW: Using written language & language (learning) awareness plus text and media competence

In the state of NW, a new PELT-curriculum was implemented in 2021 (MSB-NW, 2021). It replaced its predecessor from 2008 (MSW-NW, 2008) and, like the new curriculum for BW, brought about some fundamental changes. Probably the most relevant novelty is that from the summer of 2023 onwards, young learners study English for three lessons per week in Grades 3 and 4 rather than for two lessons per week from the second term of Grade 1 onwards. This makes NW the only German state where this is currently the case. But alterations were also made regarding the roles of language (learning) awareness and the timing of the development of the different language skills. Almost all skills are now supposed to be developed right from the beginning rather than with an initial emphasis on the receptive skills and on the oral skills. Also, as in BW, there is now a much stronger focus on the role of writing.

Using written language in NW

The curriculum of 2008 largely restricted the use of written language in PELT to supporting the development of the oral skills. In fact, the most challenging written activity the pupils were supposed to master successfully at the end of Grade 4 was to copy and/or complete sentences. In contrast, the new curriculum expects *all* learners to be able to use chunks and fixed phrases as well as their own constructions to compose short texts, including descriptions, e-mail messages and poems when they move on to secondary schools (MSB-NW, 2021, p. 45). How fundamental these changes are is becoming particularly clear when one compares the general descriptors for the use of written language in the curricula of 2008 and 2021 to each other. While the old curriculum required the pupils to be able to write short simple texts with the help of models and prepared word lists (MSW-NW, 2008, p. 79), the new guidelines ask students to be capable of producing short texts to realise their personal relevant writing targets and to do so *usually* with the help of models (MSB-NW, 2021, p. 45) – rather than do so practically always (MSW-NW, 2008, p. 79; note the absence of the word “usually”).

Language awareness, language learning awareness, and text and media competence

In 2013, the Standing Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the German Länder (KMK) published standards for English language teaching at upper secondary level (i.e. Grades 10-12 or 11-13, respectively) that assigned the sub-competences to be developed at school to five larger clusters. Two of these clusters, functional communicative competence and intercultural competence, had already been part of the standards for EFL in lower secondary school (KMK, 2004, 2005). However, while there was only a trio of competence clusters in these standards, namely functional communicative competence, intercultural competence and, as mentioned above, methodological competence, the latter was replaced by three additional ones: language awareness, language learning awareness and TMC.

These developments are relevant for PELT in NW for at least two reasons. First, in the wake of the publication of the new KMK standards, *all* EFL curricula in NW from Grade 3 to Grade 13 were based on the same new model of competence areas, namely the one first published in 2013 by the KMK (KMK, 2013). Second, the adoption of the new model meant that no fewer than two of the four clusters in the old early

EFL curriculum, availability of linguistic means and methods (MSB-NW, 2008, p. 81, 83), had to make way for the aforementioned three new areas of competence.

While, at first glance, these changes seem to be fairly substantial, a comparison of the old and the new descriptors from 2021 used to specify the respective targets assembled under these headings reveals that there are some noteworthy changes, but that there are also plenty of continuities. For example, like the curriculum of 2008, its successor also requires the children to be able to utilize mime and gestures to understand others and to document and reflect upon the progress they made in the realm of language learning awareness for example with the help of diaries or portfolios. Regarding language awareness, on the other hand, experimenting with and reflecting upon language (MSB-NW, 2021, p. 48) continue to be critical procedures in this domain, as do searching for and describing both similarities and differences between English and German as well as other heritage languages.

In addition to the continuities, there are, however, also some notable changes. Unlike the curriculum of 2008, its successor lists the ability to assess different memory and language learning strategies with regard to their situational use (MSB-NW, 2021) as a third key target in the field of language learning competence. But the biggest novelty is the inclusion of TMC as a whole new area of competence. Originating from the idea that what counts as *text* should be more than just fiction, the EFL curriculum NW – in line with the educational standards from 2013 mentioned above (KMK, 2013) – describes the scope of TMC as including all oral, written, and visual products in their respective cultural and media context (MSB-NW 2021, p. 48).

Document review 3 (DR 3): Analysis of selected teaching materials

Due to the postponement of the start of early ELT to Grade 3 in BW and NW, new coursebook materials are available or about to be published. Current coursebooks are usually a media pack that consists of a pupil's book, an activity book, and a teacher's book, accompanied by videos, software, various apps, and extra (online) materials (cf. Kolb & Schocker, 2021, pp.196-198). Excerpts of the print media of this new coursebook generation are analysed to assess to what extent the developments manifested in new (or in the case of BW supplemented) curricula have led to concrete modifications in the contents of the coursebooks as well as the teaching objectives to be pursued with these materials.

A new role for written language

The new EFL curriculum for primary schools in NW states that the pupils employ written language from day 1 as an aid to memorising and learning language as well as a key to accessing anglophone media (MSB-NW, 2021, p. 37). Moreover, the learners make the experience that they can use written English for both communicative and interactive purposes. This heightened status of written language is mirrored by the new editions of *Playway 3* and of *Come in 3* for EFL primary classrooms in NW. However, both the amount of written input and the range of activities differ noticeably from each other.

In the teacher's book for *Come in 3*, it says that there are more complex instructions than before plus various prompts asking the learner to produce their own texts by adopting models presented to them in the materials (*Come in 3 Teacher's Book*, 2023, p. 6). Also, an analysis of the new activity book (*Come in 3 Activity Book*, 2022) reveals that for example action rhymes now feature labelled visualisations of what it is the learners are supposed to do rather than just text-free pictures accompanying the respective aural input. There are now numerous boxes or short texts that feature the names of things or sentence fragments printed in light grey to invite the learners to trace the letters of these words in an adoption of a technique from L1 teaching to present written English forms much sooner than was the case in earlier versions of the material.

In the pupil's book for *Playway 3* (*Playway 3 Pupil's Book*, 2022b), neither of these two options can be found. But there are no fewer than five different kinds of stories which are all also available as video clips: There are short episodes revolving around the material's mascot Max, sketches with a clown-like figure,

stories involving characters on a fictitious planet, short narratives that can also be accessed in booklets plus finally videos involving two English children. Except for the narratives, all stories are presented in the pupil's book via series of pictures with speech bubbles. Moreover, as in *Come In 3 Activity Book*, there are numerous written instructions in *Playway 3 Pupil's Book*; and there are also formats that ask the children to produce their own more or less complex texts for example about their schoolbag (p. 22), their family (p. 44) or as riddles (e.g. p. 37). This already substantial range of text-bound activities is further expanded, among other activities, by scripts of songs, class surveys and other tasks that ask the learners to "take notes" (*Playway 3 Pupil's Book*, 2022b, p. 11) or to "make notes" (*Playway 3 Pupil's Book*, 2022b, p. 15), and formats that invite the youngsters to "write your own poem" (*Playway 3 Pupil's Book*, 2022b, p. 29). In summary, then, the *Playway* materials in particular strongly resemble what used to be typical for a start in Year 5.

Language learning awareness and text and media competence (TMC)

One noticeable difference between the new *Playway 3* and *Come in 3* materials for EFL in NW and older materials is the increased variety of text types that the learners encounter here. Probably not least because of an earlier – and stronger – curricular emphasis on dealing with written language and of the increased role of text and media competence, there are no longer almost exclusively songs, rhymes, chants, stories, and various types of *Listen and X*-exercises. There are now also note making and note taking activities, class surveys and instructions asking the learners to reconstruct sentences, give presentations and, in *Playway*, even instructions to make a video of a role play or to complete simple tasks on the internet (see *Playway 3 Pupil's Book*, 2022b, pp. 23, 27).

In addition, both the new *Playway 3* and *Come in 3* materials feature several formats to foster young learners' awareness of language (learning). Unlike previous editions, there are dedicated attempts to encourage the learners to reflect upon how they can employ their language skills in particular when working with words in *Come In 3 Activity Book* by means of "Funny's tips" (*Come In 3 Activity Book*, 2022, pp.125-126) or through short explanations followed by self-check activities in four "Lerncoaching" (i.e. coaching for learning) pages spread across the *Playway 3 Activity Book* (*Playway*, 2022a, pp. 15, 29, 43, 57). Much shorter than these pages are two to three lines of text with selected grammatical morphemes printed in red that sometimes appear after an activity in the company of an exclamation mark (*Come In 3 Activity Book*, 2022, pp. 27, 92) or of a "Look" icon (*Playway 3*, 2022a, pp. 17, 36) (see, e.g., Figure 3). These lines are apparently meant to illustrate specific grammatical phenomena. However, none of the books contains even a single sentence in English or German that would explain how the phenomenon in question is formed or used, nor are there any hints in the teacher's books as to why exactly those structures which are featured here are presented at this or any other place in the students' materials.

None of the materials contains activities that invite the learners explicitly to search for similarities or differences between English and German or another (native) language. This is rather surprising because the new EFL curriculum for NW is very clear

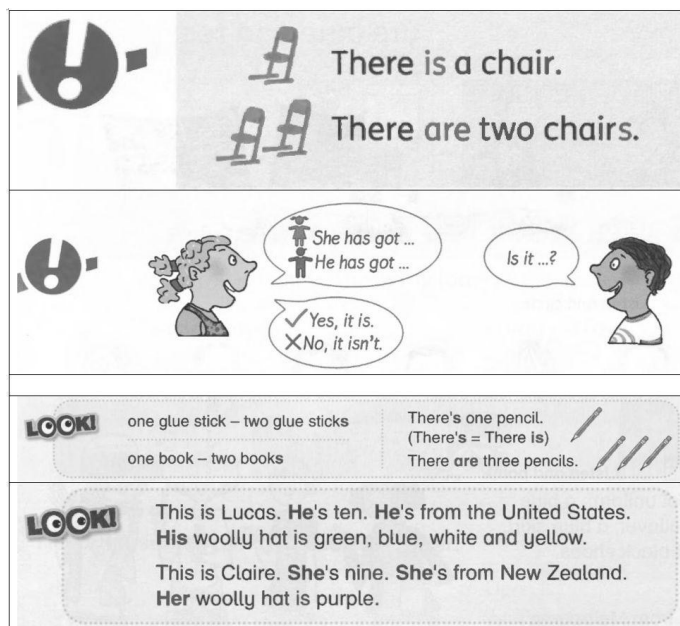


Figure 3 Examples of attempts to draw the learners' attention to selected grammatical morphemes in *Come In 3* (2022, pp. 27, 92) (exclamation marks) and *Playway 3* (2022a, 17, 36) ("Look" icons); © for the chairs Friederike Ablang, Berlin and © for the children Susann Hesselbarth, Leipzig

about this issue. In the section on language awareness, it says that the young learners realise, name and reflect upon both similarities and differences between their respective L1 and their target language English among other aspects with regard to pronunciation, the use of written English and sentence formation (MSB-NW, 2021, p. 42). However, it might also be the case that some of the aspects which are not yet dealt with in the material for Grade 3 will feature prominently in Grade 4 (and vice versa) because the curriculum refers to a two-year phase of learning and because the materials for Grade 4 were not yet available at the time of writing.

The Phonics Approach

A very specific result of tracing the focus on written text production in the above mentioned coursebooks does not only concern the skills-related tendencies of text production but also the language awareness- and language learning-related tendencies. In both, *Sunshine 3+4 for BW* (Sunshine, 2020, 2021) and *Sunshine 3+4 for NW* (Sunshine, 2023, forthcoming), the Phonics Approach is used to support children in their literacy acquisition process. With its help, children learn about phoneme-grapheme-correspondences of English which differ from German (e.g. <w> – /w/ in English but /v/ in German) and then practice segmenting words and blending phonemes. In this way, they can read out a new word or write a word they are not yet familiar with in the written form.

In all editions mentioned above, *Sunshine* uses the Phonics Approach to complement the well-known Whole-word Approach which has prevailed for decades as teaching method for reading and writing in German EFL-classrooms as well as elsewhere in both EFL language and English as a first language education. Since exercises of the Whole-word Approach help to grasp the word as a whole (= as a picture), they completely exclude the sound level and thus correspond to the first stage of written language acquisition. In contrast to this, exercises of the Phonics Approach help to grasp sound-letter correspondences and thus do include the sound level. Since they also support the recognition of orthographic patterns, they correspond to the higher levels of written language acquisition (cf. Mehlem 2023, Scheerer-Neumann 2023 for German and Brown 2019 for English). Consequently, with the emphasis on the relationship between graphemes and phonemes leading to the Phonics Approach, the current curricula (MKSJ-BW, 2020; MSB-NW, 2021) initiate developments to confront young learners with more demanding subject


The figure is divided into two main sections. The left section, titled 'A trip to London', contains a 'Number. Find the extra word' exercise with a list of 12 food items: bread, cheese, chicken, chips, egg, butter, ham, salad, tea, chocolate, sweets, and tomatoes. Below this is a crossword puzzle with the word 'WATER' filled in. The right section contains three maze puzzles. The first maze leads to a bee and the text 'The bee loves sweet'. The second maze leads to a sign that says 'Perhaps not by plane' and the text 'Greta does not travel by plane. She takes the'. The third maze leads to a boat and the text 'I need a boat to get my'. Below the mazes is an exercise: '3 Can you find more rhyme words?' with prompts for 'bee + ...', 'plane + ...', and 'boat + ...'. At the bottom, it asks 'Markiere die Buchstaben, die zum Reim gehören. Was fällt dir auf?'.

Figure 4 Whole-word Approach (Sunshine, Word Trainer 4, 2019, p. 7, © Cornelsen Verlag 2019) and Phonics Approach (Sunshine, Teacher's Book 4, 2021, KV 65, © Cornelsen Verlag 2020).

Cross-curricular topics: Issues of social and environmental nature (BW + NW)


The analysis of the coursebooks published to be used with the latest curricula (MKSJ-BW, 2020; MSB-NW, 2021), that is a start of EFL in Grade 3 only, showed that new topics made their way into the coursebooks. Instead of only topics such as birthdays, Christmas etc. which are traditionally considered appropriate for children, social and environmental topics such as sustainability and preserving nature, or mutual respect and child poverty are taken up by referring to Earth Day (*Playway 3*, 2022b, p. 84; *Sunshine 3*, 2020, p. 37; cf. Figure 6), and Children’s Day (*Sunshine 3*, 2023, p. 58), respectively, complementing the “Special days”-sections.


Special days: Earth Day





1 Talk about the pictures. What is beautiful? What is bad?


sun · bees · Earth · animals · mountains · birds · river · trees · flowers · sea · cars · bad air · fire · plastic (bottles/bags)

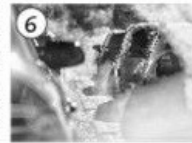













2 Read and talk about the posters.

3 Make your own poster.

★ What can YOU do to keep the Earth green?



Note

- Find out more about Earth Day. When is it?
- Can you find songs or books about Earth Day? Search for: "Earth Day song" or "Earth Day books for children".
- There is a love song to the Earth. Can you find it on the Internet?

thirty-seven 37

Figure 6 Earth Day as a “Special day” (*Sunshine 3 PB*, 2020, p. 37, © Cornelsen Verlag 2020).

Dealing with Children’s Day with its focus on social topics and Earth Day with its environmental topics fulfils the demands of cross-curricular connections (cf. 4.2.1.1 on interdisciplinary guiding principles). Furthermore, the students’ attention is drawn to the internet, search engines, etc. when they are asked to produce written texts (e.g. posters, cf. Figure 6) based on information from online resources. Next to this methodological aspect, they are familiarized with various text types by recognizing specific structures and features of posters, songs, cards, and tips. Thus, higher demands on the pupils in terms of content, methodological approach, text types, and language go hand in hand.

Discussion

Compared to the practices of FLT in the 16 federal states of Germany that could be identified in 2015 (Hempel, Kötter, & Rymarczyk, 2017; Hempel, Kötter, Rymarczyk, & Steinlen, 2017), it can be said that the experts' wishes for future developments of the respective curricula have been fulfilled. The document reviews carried out for this study showed that the demands for the learners increased, especially in the fields of writing, language awareness, and language learning awareness. The experts' demands concerning the transition from primary to secondary FLT were met by some new holistic concepts from Grade 1 to Grade 10 that guarantee a smoother transition from primary to secondary school, although there are still no national standards for PELT in Germany. In BB, BE, and NW, all EFL curricula from Grades 3-13 were based on the same new model of competence areas, thus teaching contents of the different grades especially in regard to text and media competence can now be better coordinated and aligned with each other. Other states integrated the subject English at primary level into a new framework curriculum that covers all subjects on a cross-curricular basis from Grades 1-10 for the very same purpose. As a drawback, this could also be seen as a kind of outsourcing of topics and competences because topical issues such as multilingualism, gender, diversity, sustainability, inclusion, and learner autonomy are dealt with on a cross-curricular level. This could open the doors for arbitrariness or at least less depth. At the same time, it is clear that future research must place a stronger focus on the selection of suitable content for early foreign language teaching in line with research findings on young language learners' developmental stages (Holmes & Tellier, 2022). For instance, projects such as ICEPELL (**Intercultural Citizenship Education Through Picturebooks in Early English Language Learning** (<https://icepell.eu/>)) show that picture books can be used in early foreign language teaching to address topics such as refugee experiences and war in an age-appropriate way. Yet, many questions related to the balance of linguistic and content-related challenges have not yet been sufficiently researched.

However, while the general increase of demands can be regarded as an increase in the quality of PELT, its very existence might be at risk. Shortly after the end of our document reviews, the results of the international primary school reading survey "IGLU", the German survey within the 2021 "Progress in International Reading Literacy Study" (PIRLS), were published by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (McElvany, Lorenz, Frey, Goldhammer, Schilcher & Stubbe, 2023). Due to Germany's poor performance (25.4 % of the fourth graders in Germany do not have the reading skills necessary for a successful transition from learning to read to reading in order to learn), far reaching consequences are currently discussed at least in some states: RP announced that they would follow BW and NW in teaching English/French only from the third grade in future, instead of from the first as before (<https://www.swr.de/swraktuell/rheinland-pfalz/9-punkte-plan-fuer-grundschulen-in-rlp-soll-lernerfolg-verbessern-100.html>). The steady decline in primary school children's achievements causes some politicians to ask for more class time to strengthen students' competences in the subjects German or Mathematics rather than to "waste" it on PELT.

Even though research has not demonstrated any causal connection between students' increasingly poor achievements in German or Mathematics and the fact that they learn English or another FL in primary school, some politicians as well as some lobbyists do not refrain from repeating that the start of FL-learning should be moved back to higher grades, and the President of the German Teachers' Association (a secondary grammar school teacher) has even spoken out in favour of dispensing with English lessons at primary schools altogether (ZDF, 2023). It might therefore be more important than ever to discuss the achievements and maintenance of quality in PELT to prevent its exclusion from primary school curricula. After all, on a local level PELT is of uttermost importance for the linguistic development of primary school learners, their encounter with the cultural aspects of a foreign language, and Germany's ability to connect with other (European) countries in terms of FL availability. On the global level Germany should not withdraw from the biggest worldwide policy development in education of making starting English compulsory at primary level (cf. Rixon, 2013)

Conclusion

This study contributes to the knowledge on the connection between political decisions, research findings, and early foreign language teaching practices by a fine-grained analysis of current curricular and pedagogical documents in Germany. Our first document review revealed that more than half (nine out of 16) federal states introduced new PELT curricula or supplemented existing guidelines. Two states, BW and NW, even shifted the start of PELT back from Grade 1 to Grade 3 while a third state, RP, is apparently considering a move like this (see Section 5). One persistent problem is that even almost two decades after the establishing of early FLT as a regular subject, not everyone regards and treats PELT as a subject with the same status as, for example, German or Mathematics. Within Europe, this development is relatively unique to Germany as in other European countries the importance of early language learning is steadily increasing (see Eurydice 2023).

What would certainly be helpful for the cause of early language teaching in Germany is the establishing of nationwide standards of education for PELT – which has, in fact, been on and off the political agenda for almost as long as there has been nationwide PELT in Germany. However, there are unfortunately no signs at present that a move like this is imminent in spite of the fact that this would be another strong instrument to prevent individual states from continuing to try to change the goalposts regarding what should be taught to what extent in the German primary classroom.

A second key finding of our research is that those nine states which revised or amended their curricula over the past eight years professionalized PELT. Many formulated clearer – and typically also more ambitious – targets. They tried to strengthen the links between PELT and FLT at secondary school. They strived to respond to societal developments (see also Section 4.2.1.2) and to general changes in the way people are dealing with texts and media (see also Section 4.2.2), and they also often put more emphasis on written skills and text production.

Some of these changes are already mirrored by the coursebooks we analysed in our third document review. There is more exposure to – frequently also – longer texts earlier on than used to be the case. Students are asked to produce their own texts (with or without the support of a model) fairly soon, thus providing stronger students with earlier opportunities to show what they can already do with the FL. The inclusion of phonics in *Sunshine* illustrates how one publisher tries to exploit grapheme-phoneme-correspondences more systematically than before. But there is also still room for improvement specifically with regard to text and media competence and to dealing with language (learning) awareness. It will also be crucial for the subject in general to see whether the trend to postpone the start of ELT to Grade 3 or even Grade 5 can or should be stopped and when – and how – the success of PELT will be documented in empirical work that supplements the existing body of research into the issue.

Overall, we hope that this study contributes to a better understanding of the diversity in early language learning worldwide. By providing a detailed analysis of educational documents in a specific locale, it responds to the need for descriptive studies of early language learning across varied contexts (see En-ever, 2018). It is hoped that our investigation sparks further studies in other geopolitical areas to facilitate and enhance a deeper understanding of decision-making processes in early foreign language teaching.

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