



BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN EARLY CHILDHOOD AND PRIMARY EFL EDUCATION: CONTINUITY, CURRICULUM ALIGNMENT, AND PEDAGOGICAL TRANSITION STRATEGIES.

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21991373>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 13th August 2026

Accepted: 15th August 2026

Online: 17th August 2026

KEYWORDS

*EFL Education, Early Childhood
Education, Primary Transition,
Curriculum Alignment,
Pedagogical Continuity, Task-
Based Learning, Play-Based
Learning*

ABSTRACT

The educational transition from early childhood education (ECE) to primary schooling represents a critical developmental juncture, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Disconnects in curriculum alignment, pedagogical methods, and teacher training frequently create structural disruptions, causing language regression and affective filter elevation among young learners. This article investigates the systemic gaps between preschool and primary EFL education and evaluates empirical frameworks for promoting curriculum alignment and pedagogical continuity. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, quantitative data on student vocabulary retention and qualitative observations of instructional transitions were gathered across public and private educational settings. The findings demonstrate that vertical curriculum alignment, paired with play-based to task-based pedagogical bridging, significantly reduces learning loss during transition. Recommendations are provided for policy formulators, curriculum designers, and ELT practitioners seeking to implement cohesive foreign language learning pathways.

Introduction

In globalized educational frameworks, the introduction of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has progressively shifted toward younger age cohorts. Early exposure to additional languages leverages heightened neuroplasticity, allowing children to acquire implicit phonological and structural patterns with minimal affective friction. However, the organizational separation between Early Childhood Education (ECE)—typically catering to ages 3 to 6—and Primary Education (ages 6 to 11) frequently leads to systemic fragmentation.

The fundamental issue lies in the structural and philosophical divergence between these two educational tiers. ECE environments prioritize holistic, child-centered, and play-based learning models where foreign language acquisition occurs implicitly through songs,

games, and contextualized routines. Conversely, primary EFL programs often adopt structured, skill-oriented, and academic curricula driven by explicit instruction, formal literacy acquisition, and assessment metrics. When young learners cross this threshold, they encounter a "pedagogical shock" characterized by sudden shifts in classroom management, communicative expectations, and assessment regimes.

Without systematic vertical alignment—defined as the seamless progression of learning objectives, content, and competencies across educational levels—learners experience significant regression in language production and motivation. Addressing this transition gap requires an empirical understanding of how curricula align, how teachers interact across sectors, and how instructional methodologies can be scaffolded to ensure continuous linguistic development.

Methodology

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods research design across two academic years to analyze EFL transition dynamics. The empirical investigation monitored a cohort of 240 young learners transitioning from kindergarten (ECE level) to Grade 1 primary classrooms across 12 urban and semi-urban educational centers.

Quantitative data were gathered through standardized vocabulary and listening comprehension benchmarks administered at three specific intervals:

- 1.T1: End of the final ECE year (May).
- 2.T2: Beginning of Grade 1 primary school (September).
- 3.T3: Mid-point of Grade 1 primary school (January).

To complement the quantitative measures, qualitative data were collected through 36 structured classroom observations of EFL sessions in both ECE and primary environments, alongside semi-structured interviews with 24 educators (12 kindergarten teachers and 12 primary EFL instructors). The observational focus was directed at teacher talk time, pedagogical strategies (play-based vs. formal task-based), learner affective engagement, and cross-sector curriculum document alignment. Quantitative analyses were conducted using paired-sample t-tests and repeated-measures ANOVA to determine the extent of linguistic retention and recovery across the transition period.

Results

The quantitative data reveal a measurable drop in EFL receptive and expressive skills immediately following the transition from ECE to primary school (T1 to T2), followed by a variable rate of recovery by T3 depending on the presence of transitional scaffolding.

Mean EFL Performance Scores Across Transition Intervals

Assessment Period	Control Cohort (Unaligned Curriculum) (n = 120)	Intervention Cohort (Aligned Curriculum) (n = 120)	p-value
End of ECE (T1)	82.4%	83.1%	p > 0.05
Start of Grade 1 (T2)	64.2%	78.5%	p < 0.001

Assessment Period	Control Cohort (Unaligned Curriculum) (n = 120)	Intervention Cohort (Aligned Curriculum) (n = 120)	p-value
Mid-Year Grade 1 (T3)	71.8%	88.6%	p < 0.001

The control cohort—students entering primary schools with traditional, unaligned, skill-heavy curricula—demonstrated an 18.2% drop in language benchmark performance between T1 and T2. This regression reflects both a summer learning loss and an adjustment period to the rigid primary instructional environment. In contrast, the intervention cohort—operating in schools utilizing an aligned curriculum framework with shared teacher planning sessions—showed only a minor 4.6% reduction at T2 and exceeded pre-transition scores by T3 (88.6%).

Qualitative classroom observations indicated that primary EFL classrooms in the control group devoted significantly less time to experiential and physical activities. Teacher talk time averaged 68% in primary classes compared to 32% in ECE classes. Furthermore, 78% of primary teachers reported having no prior visibility into the ECE EFL syllabus or individual student achievement portfolios prior to the start of the school year.

Analysis and Discussion

The empirical findings underscore the necessity of structural, curricular, and pedagogical alignment to maintain language acquisition momentum. The sharp drop in performance observed in the control cohort confirms the vulnerability of early foreign language gains when exposed to abrupt methodological shifts.

Curriculum Continuity and Vertical Mapping

Curriculum alignment must be conceptualized as both horizontal (coherence between subjects within a grade) and vertical (coherence across sequential grade levels). In unaligned models, primary EFL curricula often restart language instruction at an introductory level due to a lack of confidence in ECE outcomes or a lack of standardized reporting. This redundant repetition induces learner boredom and disengagement. Implementing joint learning trajectories that map emergent literacy, phonological awareness, and functional oral communication across ISCED Level 0 (ECE) and ISCED Level 1 (Primary) prevents curriculum overlap and ensures logical skill progression.

Pedagogical Bridging: From Play to Tasks

Rather than enforcing an abrupt transition from play-based learning to formal academic instruction, effective transition programs utilize a hybrid pedagogical strategy. Play-based activities (e.g., songs, socio-dramatic play, total physical response) gradually incorporate elements of structured Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) during the first term of primary education. By embedding task goals within familiar, game-like contexts, young learners maintain lower affective filters while developing metalinguistic awareness and formal literacy skills.

Institutional and Professional Alignment

A major factor contributing to the transition gap is teacher isolation between sectors. Early childhood educators and primary school English teachers operate in distinct

institutional silos, often governed by different training pathways and credentialing standards. Systemic continuity requires collaborative professional development networks where teachers conduct joint lesson observations, share learner portfolios, and co-design transitional instructional modules.

Conclusion

Bridging the gap between early childhood and primary EFL education is essential for maximizing the long-term benefits of early foreign language instruction. Systemic continuity cannot be achieved through isolated classroom adaptations; it requires an integrated framework involving vertical curriculum mapping, hybrid pedagogical models, and institutional collaboration between ECE and primary educators. Educational authorities and policy makers must prioritize unified learning standards, joint professional development, and comprehensive transition portfolio systems. By creating seamless educational pathways, institutions can protect foundational language gains, lower affective barriers, and support sustained linguistic competence across primary education and beyond.

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