

HOW DO YOUNG LEARNERS LEARN A NEW LANGUAGE?

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Abstract

Language can be defined as an organized system of arbitrary signals and rule-governed structures that are used as a means for communication. Language occurs both receptively and expressively through reading, listening, writing, and speaking. In order to become fully functioning members of school and society, children must learn the elements, the rules, the structure, and the conventions of this system. Children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners but they also lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult and often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language. Teaching English to young learners brings a number of challenges. Starting to learn English at an earlier age may not bring automatic improvements to proficiency levels, unless teacher education and secondary language teaching both adapt to meet the challenges of the new situation.

Key words: young learners, new language, language teaching

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INTRODUCTION

As humans in society, we use our language ability continuously to embrace ideas, share our feelings, comment on the world, and understand each other's minds. Language has been hailed as the hallmark of humanity, the ability that separates humans from animals (Berko-Gleason, 1997). Language can be defined as an organized system of arbitrary signals and rule-governed structures that are used as a means for communication. Language occurs both receptively and expressively through reading, listening, writing, and speaking. In order to become fully functioning members of school and society, children must learn the elements, the rules, the structure, and the conventions of this system.

According to Cameroon 2001, there are differences of teaching a foreign language to children and teaching adults or adolescents. Some differences are immediately obvious: children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners. They want to please the teacher rather than their peer group. They will have a go

at an activity even when they do not quite understand why or how. However, they also lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult. Children do not find it as easy to use language to talk about language in other words, they do not have the same access as older learners. Children often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language. This paper tries to explain how young learners learn a new language.

The young learners are students of primary school. Teaching language to young learners is guiding and facilitating young learners in aging 9-15 years old, for their activities in learning, knowing, understanding and comprehending ideas, attitudes value, skills and information of new language using tricks and strategies which will be used in changing and redefining their thought forward their daily surrounding situation as a foreign languages learners.

While there are commonalities across learners of all ages, young children differ from older children in many ways. Studies of young children show how learning changes across development. However we now that even very young children have a predisposition to learn in certain domains and those young children are actively engaged in making sense of their world. Young children appear to be predisposed to acquire information.

These biases toward certain types of learning should pave the way for competence in early schooling. Children lack knowledge and experience but not reasoning ability. Indeed, although young children are inexperienced, the reason with the knowledge they have. Precocious knowledge may jump start the learning process, but because of limited experience and underdeveloped system of logical thinking, children's knowledge contains misconceptions. Misinformation can impede school learning, so teachers need to be aware of the ways in which children's background knowledge influences their understanding. Such awareness should help teachers anticipate children's confusion and recognize why children have difficulties grasping new ideas. Strategies for learning are important.

When children are required to learn about unfamiliar knowledge domains, they need to develop intentional learning strategies. Children need to understand what it means to learn, who they are as learners, and how to go about planning,

monitoring and revising to reflect upon their learning and that of others and to learn how to determine if they understand. These met cognitive skills provide strategic competencies for learning.

The children have their own characteristics, which are different from adults. These characteristics cover their ways of thinking, their attitude, their aptitude etc. they also prevail to the children's ways of learning language. This of course influence the ways of teaching them. To give the best quality of teaching English to the children, the teachers should know and understand them.

Brumfit (1997) gives a list of the characteristics which young learners share: Young learners are only just beginning their schooling, so that teachers have a major opportunity to mould their expectations of life in school. As a group they are potentially more differentiated than secondary or adult learners, for they are closer to their varied home cultures, and new to the conformity increasingly imposed across cultural grouping by the school. They tend to be keen and enthusiastic learners. Their learning can be closely linked with their development of ideas and concepts, because it is so close to their initial experiences of formal schooling. They need physical movement and activity as much as stimulation for their thinking, and the closer together these can be the better. Children need activities that are more concrete rather than abstract and to be involved in those activities in order that they can learn the language well.

Most primary level learners will share these characteristics. Those opinions give the researcher some important notes about children's special characteristics in learning the language. They are as the following:

1. Children respond the language well through concrete things (visual things) rather than abstract things.
2. Children need physical movements and real activities to stimulate their thinking
3. Children will be enthusiastic if they are taught using fun activities or being involved in activities
4. Children love to play, and learn best when they are enjoying themselves,
5. Children learn well through something that is close to their culture,

6. Children like to work together.

Cameroon (2003) argues that the continuing growth of teaching English to young learners brings a number of challenges. Starting to learn English at an earlier age may not bring automatic improvements to proficiency levels, unless teacher education and secondary language teaching both adapt to meet the challenges of the new situation. According to Cameroon, amongst other knowledge and skills, teachers of young learners need: an awareness of how children think and learn skills and knowledge in spoken English to conduct whole lessons orally an ability to identify children's interests and use them for language teaching.

Nunan (1989: 87), states that the roles of teachers and learners are in many ways complementary. In language learning context it is believed that children will learn a foreign language more effectively under certain conditions. According to Richards and Rogers, 2001 therefore, there are some assumptions about language learning that should be considered when teaching English as foreign language to children.

- a. Learning should be fun and natural for children. In order for them to be successful in learning the target language, there must be the absence of stress. It is commonly believed that the environment of the foreign language learning often causes stress and anxiety. Children are believed not to learn language forms directly; commands are believed to be helpful for children to interpret meanings. This activity is believed to liberate self-conscious and stressful situations.
- b. The language should be first presented through sounds, not written symbols. Listening and speaking are worked on as the learners produce meaningful utterances concerning physical objects and their own experience. After children can produce sounds in the target language and connect the sounds with the truth, they may begin to read symbols in the target language. This process can begin after the children are able to understand what other people speak (listening) and able to produce the language (speaking).

- c. Children are more sensitive to anything that touches the senses; they react easily to physical objects. Language is taught by having the students use their senses: touch, see, listen, smell, and even taste if necessary. This will help them relate the linguistics signs to truth that they perceive with their senses.
- d. Meaning should be made perceptible through concrete objects or by presentation of experience. When a language learner makes a mistake or misconception of something, the teacher does not correct it through translation but he/she tries to show something to make the meaning clear.
- e. The idea that teaching should start from what the students already know in order to encourage association processes seems to favor children. By teaching through this way, children are expected to know what they are doing. They are not only saying something without being aware of what they are saying.

METHOD

The methods for teaching children should maintain the characteristics of children in order that the students can learn the target language optimally. One of the common principles that may be considered to develop or choose methods for children is that learning English language should be fun and natural. Brown (2001: 60) states that successful mastery of the second language will be due to a large extent to a learners own personal “investment” of time, effort and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language. From this principle a language teacher may develop his or her own techniques, such as introducing songs and games to make their learning fun and natural. In addition to the techniques, the choice of vocabulary and structure also make teaching children different from other levels. A language teacher should choose the simple vocabulary and structure that are relatively easy to learn.

Teaching English Games, here are some problems that many teachers have when teaching English to children: Children have short attention spans. Children forget things quickly. Very small children may not speak their own language correctly yet. Children can be shy and hesitant to participate in activities. Children

develop at different rates so there may be mixed ability levels in one class even though all the children are of the same age. Children learn through repetition which can be boring. “It is quicker to raise a child’s motivation and enthusiasm than an adult’s but it is also easier to lose a child’s motivation and enthusiasm than it is with an adult’s,” says teacher trainer, Olga Simpson, for the EBC International TEFL Certificate Course, in a March 2010 phone interview.

Children have a great need to be motivated in order to learn effectively, and a teacher will often be faced with the question, “What do we win?” Children love prizes and rewards even if the prize is a key ring or box of Smartest. A smart teacher can make badges and pin them on winners if prize-giving becomes too pricey. Even though children love prizes they shouldn’t be the focus for every task. Intrinsic motivation or interest in doing the learning activity is what counts so a teacher should use the 3 important sources of interest for children: pictures, stories and games.

Pictures or posters should be colorful, clear and professionally drawn. Photographs or the children’s own drawings can be used too. For children, the dominant sense is the visual channel. If young learners are not given something to look at that is relevant to the learning task, they will get distracted by something else that is of more interest to them.

Children love being read stories, and most of the vocabulary for a story can be pre-learnt through games before the story is read. Telling a story in a foreign language is one of the simplest and richest sources of input for children as long as there are lots of colorful pictures the children can look at while listening.

Games put the fun back into learning, and playing is what children do naturally, so a smart teacher should capitalize on what children want to do. A teacher should have a selection of games and songs ready so that activities can be changed every 5 to 15 minutes depending on the age group of the children. Games can be used to teach vocabulary and expressions and develop listening and comprehension skills.

CONCLUSION

From the explanations in the previous chapter, it can be concluded that how young learners learn a new language is different from adult learn a new language. Children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners but they also lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on tasks they find difficult and often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language.

Teaching English to young learners brings a number of challenges. Starting to learn English at an earlier age may not bring automatic improvements to proficiency levels, unless teacher education and secondary language teaching both adapt to meet the challenges of the new situation.

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