

TEACHING YOUNG LEARNERS TO EFFICIENTLY COMMUNICATE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Teaching English in the primary classroom can be both a rewarding and a demanding experience. To make this experience easier for both learners and teachers we must try to identify what learning a language in school requires for young children and what it can offer them. One should also discover what implications these particular demands and needs have for teachers. Young children need to feel secure and know that there is some obvious reason for using English. Therefore teachers have to motivate them to acquire as much information as possible in order to be able to communicate fluently using the foreign language. This article focuses on the way in which children learn English and on their motivations for gathering the necessary language knowledge.

Keywords: communication, language teaching, young learners.

The importance of the English language is recognized in Romania. That is why children are encouraged to study English starting from kindergarten. English is important for tourism, international business, and an increased knowledge of technology and science. Romanian people think that English is the most important foreign language, so they want their children to study it from their youth.

In order to be able to understand children's behaviour while learning, we have to take into account Piaget's studies concerning the psychological development of children. According to Jean Piaget, learning is a continuous process "of construction and reorganization of knowledge, with the learner taking responsibility for constructing and reorganizing" (Lambert *et al.*, 2002).

Piaget kept detailed records of his children, observed how they used different objects and paid attention to the way in which a child described things. He believed one could deduce key elements of the child's thinking. The topic of

language and speech among children was the subject of Piaget's first book, *The Language and Thought of the Child*. He observed that children's speech can be classified into one of two types: **socialized** and **egocentric** speech.

Around the age of two, children first begin to talk. The child's speech is entirely egocentric, meaning that the "speech reflects what the child is thinking at the present moment, whether or not what is being said makes sense to anyone but himself" (Singer & Revenson, 1996).

He set up various experiments to ascertain how children thought in and about different situations and how they cognitively developed. He was trying to understand how, going through life experiences, children solved problems and how this changed as they got older. His experiments with children were carried out under strict conditions. Children developed through specific stages and the first stage was the "Sensory Motor Stage", from 0-18 months, in which the child was learning through interaction with the world around him. The researcher felt that the child was particularly ego-centric at this stage.

The next stage was the "Concrete Operational Stage", from 18 months-11 years, divided into the pre-operational and the concrete operational stages in which the child developed and was able to operate through interaction with the concrete world around him. Then, the child moved to more abstract thought within the final stage, the "Formal Operational Stage" (Brewster, 1991, Cameron, 2001).

Piaget tried to find out how children can add new knowledge to support old knowledge already established by them and change their

present understanding of something based on the new experience they've had (Cameron, 2001).

According to Piaget, these stages were fixed in age and were in a particular sequential order. Children could only move onto the next stage when they had completed the previous one and were ready to do so.

A number of authors recreated many of Piaget's experiments and felt that his measurements did not really reflect the way children were able to think and did not, for example, take into account what sense the child was making of the adult questioning and the fact that the 'experiment' was taking place in a very unnatural setting for them (Cameron, 2001).

Some people believe that small children are too young for foreign language learning. They think children may confuse their second language (L2) with their first language (L1) because their L1 competence is not fully developed. Anyway, childhood education should begin as early as possible.

Piaget's theory has been highly criticized.

Even if adults possess superior cognitive capacity, they often do not successfully learn a second language. Adults, with formal operational thought, could profit from certain grammatical explanations and deductive thinking. But it is hard to say that adults can really benefit from such explanations since it also depends on the teacher's explanation suitability. In addition, in communication, adults do not have much time for grammatical thinking, but children with intuitive learning perform better than adults in the area of second language acquisition.

Young learners need to feel that they are making progress. They need continual encouragement as well as praise for good performance, as any success motivates. Parents are in an ideal position to motivate and therefore help their children learn, even if they have only basic English knowledge themselves and are learning alongside their young children.

Parents cannot only bring their child's English language and activities into family life, but also influence their young children's attitudes to language learning and other cultures. It is now generally accepted that most lifelong attitudes are formed by the age of eight or nine.

Children are already very good at interpreting meaning without necessarily understanding the individual words and they already have great skill in using limited language creatively. Young learners frequently learn indirectly rather than directly and take great pleasure in finding and creating fun in what they do.

Teachers need to show them how the new language can have a link with their everyday lives and introduce the idea that it is positive to speak another language and communicate more easily in a world which is becoming highly globalized. Teachers need to act as mentors and language and thinking modellers of this other language.

Intonation, gesture, facial expressions, actions and circumstances all help to tell the young learners what the unknown words and phrases probably mean. By understanding the message in this way, they start to understand the language. Virtually all English teachers have certain preconceived ideas or beliefs about how best to approach English teaching. They often come into an English classroom conditioned by their previous educational experiences, cultural backgrounds, and social interaction, which may further shape their beliefs about English teaching.

In one of her articles, Annie Hughes (2003) provides a checklist for teachers when trying to establish the right environment for the foreign language classroom for young learners, which links back to our understanding of how young pupils learn:

1. Try to create everyday, real situations for language use within the classroom in which one of the only new aspects of the interaction is the foreign language. This way the child will be familiar with everything else that is going on around it and can concentrate mainly on the new tool of communication (Tough, 1976).
2. Have a continued exchange of meaning in our activities in the classroom through real interaction and communicative activities (Wells, 1986).
3. Create activities through topics that are related to everyday situations and routines and which are relevant to our learners (Tough, 1976).
4. Support and extend children's learning as 'caretakers' (Vygotsky, 1978).

5. Encourage the learner to be a thinker and problem-solver and to respond to and develop through challenge (Fisher, 1990).
6. Create a stress-free, interesting and supportive environment for our learners (Tough, 1976).
7. Recycle input in a variety of different contexts that will create a highly meaningful, purposeful and motivating learning environment.

In other words, it is a good idea to set up real tasks in the language classroom if possible. Real tasks provide children with an occasion for real language use, and let their subconscious mind work on the processing of language while their conscious mind is focused on the task. Games are very important for indirect learning because they provide an effective opportunity for the real using and processing of language while the mind is focused on playing the game. Games are not a waste of time but real work, a central part of the process of getting hold of the language because children have a very good sense of play and fun.

Children can have better ideas than teachers. An example is given in Susan Halliwell's *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom* (1993). The author's description refers to a class of nine to ten year olds. They were doing an activity which asked them to follow directions round a map in order to check true/false statements about the location of shops. The cards and maps they were using had been clipped together with a paper clip. One pair proceeded to "drive" the paper round the map each time they traced the route. They made appropriate cornering noises as they turned left or right, and reversed with much vocal squealing of brakes when they went wrong. The teacher's first reaction was to tell them not to be silly. Second thoughts suggested that, by translating understanding into physical reaction, they had thought up a much more powerful way of giving meaning to the phrases "turn left/turn right, take the second turning on the left/right" etc. Teachers' understanding of how children learn English will determine their philosophy of teaching, teaching styles, methods, and classroom management techniques.

Real life has to be concerned with real life. At the same time, it is important to remember the fact that reality for children includes imagination

and fantasy. Imagination provides a very powerful stimulus on children.

Annie Hughes (2003) states that activities need to consist of real language activities, as opposed to "empty" language classroom activities. Children need the opportunity to interact with each other in a meaningful way, for example, by carrying out a survey of their favourite fruit (in the target language), rather than by drilling names of fruit with no context for the language. Purposeful activity not only encourages real interaction, but also gives the learners a wonderful opportunity to talk about themselves, which is a great motivator.

Children are different from adults in terms of various factors such as cognitive skills and physical maturity. We cannot directly apply to children the results of motivational research on adults. We do not have to omit the fact that children are naturally enthusiastic and interested in finding out about the world around them. This can be a valuable source of motivation in the classroom. Through our own attitudes as teachers and through the activities and materials we use in class we can motivate them to explore new areas of interest. We can encourage children by showing them that we truly enjoy what we are doing (e.g. speaking English), which will lead them to develop a positive attitude as well helping them feel successful in all their efforts - from the very simple to the more complex. They then develop confidence to do more. When children are interested and confident they feel more successful. Nothing succeeds like success. But not all children have the same interests; many have to be encouraged to listen to a new language. We, as teachers, have to find the resources and activities that suit the individuals in our classes. One of the resources that can be used during the English lessons refers to technology. Learning a language is one of the more difficult tasks any child will face during their education. Considering all human cognitive abilities, the use of language is the most impressive.

Language, more than anything, is responsible for the current state of human civilization. It is the principle by which knowledge is recorded and transmitted from one generation to the next.

Without language there would be very little technology. Language provides the means to communicate a person's knowledge, feelings and thoughts. Imagine life without language, much of the joy of living would be lost. Learning a foreign language may be the most complex and difficult task any student will undertake. In the task of helping to teach this complex subject, computers have been an available resource for the last period.

Children are tomorrow's society and we should concentrate our efforts as teachers and parents, as designers and developers of technology towards them, and create an educational environment that engages and gives children the opportunity to accomplish the optimal learning experience. Learning in the classroom is essentially a social activity; it takes place in a shared environment, the classroom, where communication is an important feature of learning. The teacher is very much needed in the classroom where computer based learning takes place. What we need to look at consequently is how the use of the computer in the classroom affects the relationship between teacher and pupil and what role changes take place.

Looking at foreign language teaching, the use of communication over the Internet could be of great help in allowing the practice of language

skills that go beyond school boundaries and share the experience of learning a second language with students from all around the world.

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