



How to teaching English to Young Learners effectively

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Keywords

young learners, methods, language acquisition, English language teaching, early foreign language learning

Abstract

Knowledge of foreign languages is essential today. The introduction of foreign language instruction in Poland at every stage of education has made it possible to popularize the study of foreign languages, mainly English. The claim that the earlier foreign language learning is introduced, the higher the level students will achieve, has sparked interest in the methods and techniques used when working with children in English classes. In addition, a basic understanding of first- and second-language acquisition processes is indispensable. This article presents selected methods for working with children in English language classes.

1. Introduction

Learning foreign languages has become very popular nowadays. Its popularity is the result of its importance in today's world. The presence of Poland in the European Union has forced people to learn languages spoken in other countries (Enever, 2011). Although many people are willing to learn a foreign language, not everyone is able to achieve the same level of knowledge. It is believed that the sooner we start learning a foreign language, the better results we may expect, and therefore many parents (Szulc-Kurpaska, 2011) are interested in finding a kindergarten where a foreign language is taught and then, a primary school in which their children will continue the education. Children themselves seem to be interested in playing rather than learning, and they may not be willing to be involved in the learning process. Thus, the best strategy to be used while teaching English to children appears to be the play. All teachers

should take this fact into consideration while preparing activities for children. However, one should remember that children are spontaneous, and like taking part in every new situation and experience. Children can be divided into two groups: those from kindergarten for whom motor movement involved in every play is important, and those from primary school for whom the learning process is more conscious, with play still occupying a very important place in their life.

The main purpose of this article is to present some effective ways of teaching English to children. An overview of teaching methods emphasizing individual features of learners as the main factor affecting the teaching and learning process will be presented. Childhood is a period of our life, which is thought to be the time of play, spontaneity and fun. However, looking at the issue more closely, childhood also appears to be the time of physical and mental development. The mental processes include: acquiring the first language, gaining knowledge about the world, as well as remembering and forgetting. All of the processes are connected with memory. All the received information is separated and stored in a child's brain. starting with communication with parents, children gradually develop their linguistic competence.

First and second language acquisition

The process of first language acquisition (FLA) is more natural in comparison to the process of acquiring a second language (SLA). The process of first language acquisition starts very early and develops gradually, while the process of acquiring a second language starts when a learner has already acquired the first language.

Brown (year) called the process of acquiring the first language a child's language development and divided it into several stages:

- birth – crying,
- 6 weeks- cooing,
- 6 months – bubbling,
- 12 months –one - word utterances,
- 18 months – two - word utterances, telegraphic speech,
- 2 years – word inflection?,
- 2 years until 4 years – questions and negatives,
- 5 years – more complex construction, a child speaks a lot,
- 10 years – natural speech,
- school age in general – a child learns what to say and what not to say.

There are some theories which may explain why children acquire languages so quickly and effectively. These theories include: behaviourism, nativism and interactionism, also called functional.

Behaviourists, such as Skinner claimed that “children come into the world with a tabula rasa, a clean slate bearing no preconceived notions about the world or about language, and that these children are then shaped by their environment and slowly conditioned through various Schedule of reinforcement” (Brown, 2000, p. 22). What is more, Jenkins and Palermo year put emphasis on imitation as the most important factor in first language acquisition. They believed that children learned their first language by imitating the verbal behaviour of their parents and other adults surrounding them. However, that theory ignored the child’s creativity and failed to account for the interactive nature of language acquisition.

Nativists asserted that language acquisition is innately determined. They claimed that “we are born with genetic capacity that predisposes us to a systematic perception of language around us, resulting in the construction of an internalized system of language” (Brown, 2000, p. 24). Apart from that, Chomsky and McNeill year suggested that this innate knowledge is embodied in “a little black box” called the Language Acquisition Device (LAD). LAD consists of four innate linguistic features:

- the ability to distinguish human speech, sounds from others,
- the ability to organise input and transform it into intake,
- knowledge that certain linguistic system is possible,
- the ability to evaluate a language and create simplest possible system.

Nativists took into consideration the creativity, the meaning, and the abstractness included in a child’s responses.

The interactionists stated that “what children learn about language is determined by what they already know about the world” (Brown, 2000, p. 28). Additionally, Gleitman and Wanner year noted that “children appear to approach language learning equipped with conceptual interpretive abilities for categorizing the world” (Brown, 2000, p. 28). For the interactionists, interactions between a child and an adult are a crucial element in first language acquisition. Moreover, Slobin (1986, p. 28) presented two steps to the language development:

- the functional level – the development based on the growth of the conceptual and communicative capacities – innate cognition,
- the formal level – the development is based on the growth of information – processing capacities and innate pattern of grammar.

Comparing all these theories, it may be concluded that input given by adults and constant interaction are the most powerful factors affecting first language acquisition. However, there is also one more factor which

is crucial, namely it is age. As Harmer notes, "acquisition (...) is guaranteed for children up to the age of six, is steadily compromised from until shortly after puberty, and is rare thereafter" (Harmer, 2001, p. 37). That is why, in order to find out the answers the question whether age influences language acquisition many research studies have been carried out. Lenneberg was the first scholar who started to Take into consideration the matter while observing children and came up with the conclusion that "the ability to develop normal behaviors and knowledge in a variety of environments dose not continue indefinitely and that children who have never learned language (because of deafness or extreme isolation) cannot return to normal if these deprivations go on for too long. He argued that the language acquisition device, like other biological functions, works successfully only when it is stimulated at the right age' (Lightbown, Spada, 1993, p. 11). Later Lenneberg presented the theory of the Critical Period Hypothesis which states that there is a biologically determined period of life when a language can be acquired and beyond which acquiring language is disturbed or even impossible. Following the Critical Period Hypothesis for first language acquisition, some researchers suggested that there is also a critical period for second language acquisition.

Lenneberg, in his research, concentrated on the human brain and its participation in the process of acquiring the first language Many researchers followed him and attempts have been made to study the functions of the brain in the process of acquiring a language. The human brain matures and due to that certain functions are assigned to the left hemisphere of the brain, and others to the right one. This kind of assignment is called lateralisation of the brain. Lenneberg suggested that "lateralisation is a slow process that begins around the age of two and is completed around puberty" (Brown, 2000, p. 55). Functions such as intellectual, logical and analytic thinking appear to be located in the left hemisphere, while generalization, metaphors, artistic expressions, emotional and social needs are located in the right hemisphere. Later, Scovel year proposed these findings of Lenneberg for second language acquisition. He noted that "plasticity of the brain prior to puberty enables children to acquire not only their first language but also a second one" (Brown, 2000, p. 55).

The aspects of the critical period and lateralization should be both taken into account when teaching a language to children, as they emphasize the importance of age in the acquisition of one's first as well as a second language.

When starting learning a second language, usually regardless of age, all learners have already acquired their first language. That is why the process of second language acquisition can be described as the way in which people learn a foreign language differently to their mother tongue. The prior knowledge can be an advantage in the sense that the learner has an idea how a language works. However, some researchers (e.g.?) claim that the same knowledge may lead to incorrect guesses about how the language works and may make learning the second language difficult.

The theories of second language acquisition, such as the behaviourist theory, the cognitive psychology theory and the constructivist theory all mention the issue of the interference of mother tongue.

According to behaviourists, learning takes place through a habit formation. Lightbown and Spada suggested that “learners receive linguistic input from speakers in their environment, and positive reinforcement for their correct repetitions and imitations. As a result, habits are formed. Because language development is described as the acquisition of a set of habits, it is assumed that a person learning a second language starts off with habits associated with their first language. These habits interfere with those needed for the second language speech and new habits must be formed” (Lightbown, Spada, 1993, p. 23). However, behaviourists suggest that the influence of habits on second language learning can be decreased when a learner systematically uses the knowledge already acquired while learning a new language.

The cognitive psychology theory puts emphasis on speaking and understanding of the second language. Researchers claimed that “at first, learners have to pay attention to any aspect of the language which they are trying to understand or produce. Gradually, through experience and practice, learners become able to use certain parts of their knowledge so quickly and automatically that they are not even aware that they are doing it” (Lightbown, Spada, 1993, p. 25).

The constructivist theory states that when learning a second language one needs some social interaction and a particular context or reality. Piaget and Vygotsky, both commonly described as constructivists, differ in the extent to which they emphasized a social context. Piaget year stated that the individual cognitive development is the most important and the social interaction only triggers the development at the right moment in time. On the other hand, Vygotsky year claimed that life, coexistence, learning from society were foundational in a person’s cognitive development.

Taking into consideration the first and second language theories, we may notice that the main difference between first and second language acquisition is that, the mother tongue is acquired in a more natural way and when learning a second learning an artificial environment is created. The difference is especially important when our learners are children who do not have enough knowledge to understand abstract situations. consequently, it is vital to create appropriate conditions for children to learn, prepare proper tasks and crucially, in order to achieve success when teaching English to children, to choose the most effective method of teaching.

2. Approaches and methods in the practice of teaching English

Many approaches, methods, procedures and techniques of teaching a second language have been introduced by different researchers and scholars. Choosing and matching an appropriate approach with learners' needs is a key to success.

Although teachers are looking for new modern approaches, methods and techniques nowadays, it is worth mentioning that the most important procedures which influence English language teaching are still being in use by teachers: the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, Audiolingual Approach, Community Language Learning, The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, The Communicative Approach, The Natural Approach and Total Physical Response.

The Grammar –Translation Method – was originally used to teach Latin and Greek, and was applied to the teaching of modern languages in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Its main purpose was to make students explore pieces of literature. Students first deductively learned the rules of grammar and bilingual lists of vocabulary. The method may be useful when teaching students at a high proficiency level, but it does not appear to be useful for students at lower levels, especially for children who do not have any ideas about the rules of the grammar of their mother tongue and have just started to form their abilities.

The Audiolingual Approach, also known as the Aural-Oral Method of language teaching, relied heavily on the habit-forming drills which were designed in order to minimize the possibility of making mistakes. Students are required to repeat utterances till the moment they are able to produce them without any mistakes. This method, however, has some

drawbacks, as language is not put into context and carries little communicative function. Moreover, spending a whole lesson on repeating the same utterance may be boring, especially for children who may also be unwilling to speak when forced to do so.

Community Language Learning (CLL) – the first principle of CLL is that the teacher plays the role of a counselor and provides the language necessary for students to express themselves freely and to say whatever they feel like. The method does not seem to be suitable for children who need to be provided with ideas to learn and the constant repetition of the previously introduced material.

The Silent Way – every learner is responsible for what they learn and must use their own inner resources (such as experiences, emotions, knowledge of the world) to absorb learning from their environment. The method would be good for students at a higher proficiency level who have gained some knowledge of the world but not for children who very often cannot control their reactions and who are incapable of taking responsibility for their learning process.

Suggestopedia – the method emphasizes relaxation techniques and concentration as crucial to activate learner's subconscious resources. It involves pleasant atmosphere, soft lights, baroque music and comfortable seating. Suggestopedia is a dialogue based approach in which the input material is exclusively prepared. However, it might seem to be uninteresting for children who cannot see a real context of artificial dialogues.

The Communicative Approach – The method stresses the importance of language functions rather than grammar or vocabulary. The method is related to the idea that “language learning will take care of itself, and that plentiful exposure to language in use is vitally important for a student's development of knowledge” (Harmer, 2001, p. 85). However, it does not work properly for children who need not only exposure but also, or even more importantly, interaction.

The Direct Method – the founders of the method believed that students learn to understand a language by listening to it in large quantities. Language is learned through the direct association of words and phrases with objects and action without the use of mother tongue. The method is appropriate for students who have already had some experience with the target language. However, the method may be difficult to implement with children, since it does not involve translation and children may have problems guessing the meaning which the teacher presents in the form of other words, body and facial expressions.

The Natural Approach – the method stresses the importance of teaching and practicing vocabulary via oral skills and puts little emphasis on structural accuracy. All activities are contextualized and personalized. The method emphasizes teacher-centred questioning techniques but it can be easily connected with other procedures.

Total Physical Response – is based on the belief that listening comprehension should be developed fully in the same way as it is done with children learning their first language before any active oral participation is expected. Skills can be more rapidly acquired when the teacher appeals to students' kinaesthetic-sensory system. However, there are very few proficiency goals in the method.

To sum up, as far as teaching children is concerned, three approaches should be considered when making the decision about which method to choose: the Direct Method, the Natural Approach and Total Physical Response. These techniques, when combined, create a very useful tool in the process of teaching a second language to children.

Teaching very young learners

Some features of a child's development are vital in order to understand children's abilities as far as learning a second language is concerned. When discussing teaching English to children, one must distinguish between young and very young learners. According to Reilly and Ward (1997:3), the term 'very young learners' "refers to children who have not yet started compulsory schooling and have not yet started to read". From this statement one may assume that very young learners are children around the age of three to six, and more recently, because of new regulations, two years of age. Therefore, during the teaching process, teachers must consider the most important features of very young children.

Also Harmer (2001, p. 38) presents some features of very young learners. He states that:

- children respond to the meaning even if they do not understand individual words,
- children usually learn indirectly rather than directly, additionally they do not understand abstract ideas,
- children have a need for individual attention and approval from the teacher,
- children are characterised by a limited attention span, which means that unless activities are extremely involving, they can easily get bored, losing their interest after a few minutes.

Moreover, Scott and Ytreberg (1990: 3) add that "young learners love

to play, and learn best when they are enjoying themselves. But they also take themselves seriously and like to think that what they are doing is 'real' work".

According to Komorowska (2002, p. 29), what characterizes children is the need to listen and inability to read and write. consequently, there is a huge need to provide children with an appropriate amount of listening activities such as stories, songs and rhymes, for children acquire their first language through listening. What is more, very young children cannot read and write which means that the teacher cannot use reading material in the process of teaching English. Apart from that, children can easily get bored and as a result activities that are used in the classroom should be short and involving.

On the basis of all these features, one can infer that for young learners the most effective lesson will be the one which will satisfy their needs. That is why, such a lesson must involve a wide range of activities must suit young learners and these can be: songs, rhymes, stories and different total physical response tasks. On the basis of these argument it is clear that teachers should pay more attention to prepared materials and adjust them to the children's needs. The next step would be also to include some language games into lessons.

Games

Although some researchers see games as a waste of time, many methodologists think that games can be a very useful and effective tool in the process of teaching very young learners. According to Brzezińska (1995:86), a game combines all development tendencies of a child and affects its progress. She argues that play can be called the most important activity determining development of each child.

According to Halliwell (1992, p. 6) "...games are more than an extra fun. They also provide an opportunity for the real using and processing of a language while the mind focused on the 'task' of playing a game. In this way, games are a very effective opportunity for indirect learning". She also underlines that games "are a central part of the process of getting hold of the language".

Following Scott and Ytreberg's (1992, p. 6) opinion that "children have an amazing ability to absorb language through play and other activities which they find enjoyable", teachers should try to apply different games into the process of teaching very young learners.

Games are fun and children like to play them. Through games children experiment, discover and interact with their environment. Games add variation to a lesson and increase motivation. The game context makes

the foreign language immediately useful to the children. It brings the target language to life.

Games are task based – English is a tool for children to reach a goal which is not directly language related. The key to a successful language game is that the rules are clear and the ultimate goal is well defined. Language games are a healthy challenge to a child's analytical thought. (Lewis, 2015)

Conclusion

Knowing approaches, methods and techniques should be considered important for all the teachers who are willing to work effectively, especially with children. The age of the students is a major factor in a decision about how and what to teach. While deciding on teaching English to young learners one should understand that the classroom should be bright and colourful, with windows the children can see out of, and with enough room for different activities to be taking place. According to Susan Halliwell „We are obviously not talking about classroom where children spend all their time sitting still in rows or talking only to the teacher” (Halliwell, 2010). Because children love discovering things, and because they respond well to being asked to use their imagination, they may well be involved in puzzle-like activities, in making things, in drawing, in games, in physical movement or in songs.

Finally, young learners might be the most difficult group to teach. The difficulties with teaching pupils are mainly caused by their lack of motivation and purposes for learning. They are not as focused on the lesson as the adolescence or adults. Thus, the way in which the lesson will be conducted impacts considerably on learners' attitudes, success and motivation (Stachniuk, 2003, p. 20).

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Jak skutecznie nauczać języka angielskiego młodych uczniów

Słowa kluczowe

młodzi uczniowie, metody, przyswajanie języka, nauczanie języka angielskiego, wczesne nauczanie języka obcego

Abstrakt

Znajomość języków obcych jest niezbędna w obecnych czasach. Nauczanie języka obcego w Polsce, wprowadzone na każdym etapie edukacji, pozwoliło rozpowszechnić naukę języka obcego, głównie angielskiego. Wysuwana teza, iż czym wcześniej wprowadzona zostanie nauka języka obcego, tym wyższy poziom uczyący będą reprezentować, powoduje zainteresowanie metodami i technikami pracy wykorzystywanymi w pracy z dziećmi na zajęciach języka angielskiego. Dodatkowo, niezbędna jest podstawowa wiedza o procesach akwizycji języka pierwszego oraz drugiego.

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia wybrane metody pracy z dziećmi na zajęciach języka angielskiego

