

Teaching English Language to Young Learners

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Abstract: English for young learners at the primary level (approximately ages of three to twelve years old) are cognitively primed to acquire language skills in ways that lend themselves to an integrated skills and content-based, experiential approach. In this article, students have the opportunity to explore best descriptions for children's characteristics, degree of their knowledge and learn basic researches in teaching English language to young learners.

Keywords—recurrent regularities, enactive, iconic and symbolic representation, muscle memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of teaching young learners particularly in teaching English, has expanded enormously in the last recent years. We need therefore to draw on work from beyond language classrooms: in child development, in learning theory, in first language development, and in development of a second language in bilingual context (Cameron, 2002). The major theorist in developmental psychology, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, highlighting key ideas from their work that can inform how we think of the child as a language learner. The outcome of cognitive development is thinking. The intelligent mind creates from experience "generic coding systems that permit one to go beyond the data to new and possibly fruitful predictions" (Bruner, 1957, p. 234). Thus, children as they grow must acquire a way of representing the "recurrent regularities" in their environment. So, to Bruner, important outcomes of learning include not just the concepts, categories, and problem-solving procedures invented previously by the culture, but also the ability to "invent" these things for oneself. Cognitive growth involves an interaction between basic human capabilities and "culturally invented technologies that serve as amplifiers of these capabilities". These culturally invented technologies include not just obvious things such as computers and television, but also more abstract notions such as the way a culture categorizes phenomena, and language itself. Bruner would likely agree with Vygotsky that language serves to mediate between environmental stimuli and the individual's response. The aim of education should be to create autonomous learners (i.e., learning to learn). In his research on the cognitive development of children (1966), Jerome Bruner proposed three modes of representation:

- a. Enactive representation (action-based)
- b. Iconic representation (image-based)
- c. Symbolic representation (language-based)

Bruner's Three Modes of Representation. Modes of representation are the way in which information or knowledge are stored and encoded in memory. Rather than neat age related stages (like Piaget), the modes of representation are integrated and only loosely sequential as

they "translate" into each other.

Enactive (0 - 1 years) This appears first. It involves encoding **action based information** and storing it in our memory. For example, in the form of movement as a **muscle memory**, a baby might remember the action of shaking a rattle. The child represents past events through motor responses, i.e. an infant will "shake a rattle" which has just been removed or dropped, as if the movements themselves are expected to produce the accustomed sound. And this is not just limited to children. Many adults can perform a variety of motor tasks (typing, sewing a shirt, operating a lawn mower) that they would find difficult to describe in iconic (picture) or symbolic (word) form.

Iconic (1 - 6 years) This is where information is stored visually in the form of **images** (a mental picture in the mind's eye). For some, this is conscious; others say they don't experience it. This may explain why, when we are learning a new subject, it is often helpful to have diagrams or illustrations to accompany verbal information.

Symbolic (7 years onwards) This develops last. This is where information is stored in the form of a code or symbol, such as **language**. This is the most adaptable form of representation, for actions & images have a fixed relation to that which they represent. Dog is a symbolic representation of a single class. Symbols are flexible in that they can be manipulated, ordered, classified etc., so the user isn't constrained by actions or images. In the symbolic stage, knowledge is stored primarily as words, mathematical symbols, or in other symbol systems. Bruner's constructivist theory suggests it is effective when faced with new material to follow a progression from enactive to iconic to symbolic representation; this holds true even for adult learners. A true instructional designer, Bruner's work also suggests that a learner even of a very young age is capable of learning any material so long as the instruction is organized appropriately, in sharp contrast to the beliefs of Piaget and other stage theorists.

In learning language, children begin learning simple expressions. Broadly speaking, children learn abstract rules

of language from which they listen, and even they also learn expressions that they have never heard before. It is extremely important that teachers not only get children to learn language, but they also encourage them to learn it positively. Teaching of English for Children has been of particular concerns. For this reason, in teaching children English, there are some characteristics of whom presented by Scott and Lisbeth (1992). Children aged 8-10 are mature enough; They have a particular point of view; they are able to describe the difference between facts and fictions; they are curious of asking questions; they believe in what is said and the real world to express and comprehend meaning/message; they have distinct opinions about what they like and what they dislike; they are open to what happens in the classroom and begin asking a teachers decision; and they can cooperate with each other and learn from others.

Scott and Lisbeth (1992) say that children particularly aged 8-10 are competent mother tongue users. In this regard, they are aware of basic linguistic rules of their mother tongue. At these ages, children can grasp abstracts and symbols, generalize language, and systematize it. Children are also capable of interpreting meaning without understanding (Widodo, Teaching Children 237 words) separately, are competent in using language creatively, are frequently fond of doing exploration and making a certain condition enjoyable; have established imagination; and are fond of communicating (Halliwell, 1992). In the context of teaching, most people assume that children learn a foreign language in the same way that they learn their mother tongue. Basically, children are potential in acquiring and learning a foreign language, and even they learn it more quickly than those who are learning the foreign language after puberty (McLaughlin, 1978). On the contrary, children are less capable of absorbing or acquiring a foreign language optimally (Long, 1990). Hashemi (2008) believes that teaching to children is a delicate and sensitive task for the following reasons :

- Language learning class for them is their first year of schooling;
- They are highly motivated and energetic;
- They are new sponges to absorb;
- They have various language backgrounds;
- They are easily frustrated if corrected immediately;
- They are ready to imitate and participate;
- They love group work;
- They love independence;
- They need respect and attention;
- They easily learn from their environments;
- They are great competitors;

“Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand” (Ancient Chinese Proverb). Children tend to have shorter attention spans and a lot of physical energy. They are very much linked to their surroundings and are

more interested in the physical and the tangible phenomena. As Scott and Ytreberg describe, “Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times”. Teaching English to children is different from teaching English to adults - young learners learn differently from adult learners. They easily get bored, losing interest after a short period of time. In order to keep them engaged it is necessary to supplement the activities with lots of brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets, or objects. Using these activities, a language teacher can make the language input enjoyable and comprehensible as well. A great teaching idea is to collect useful resources of toys, puppets, pictures, maps, calendars, and other paraphernalia and saving them for use in each other’s classes. Using gestures and body language are very effective for young learners to gain understanding of language. Moreover, it is recommended that teachers keep children active and motivated, using a song, story, game, or a teacher- made activity. The more fun the activities, the better they will remember the language materials presented. One way to make the learning more fun is to involve students in the creation of the visuals or realia. Having children involved in creating the visuals that are related to the lesson helps engage students in the learning process by introducing them to the context as well as to relevant vocabulary items. Language teachers can use language related arts and crafts activities while making or drawing the visuals. Certainly students are more likely to feel interested and invested in the lesson and will probably take better care of the materials. We can get students to draw different characters or even create puppets. For younger students who can not even draw well, make them copy what you or other learners draw on the board . You may use the puppets to dramatize the dialogues or check their comprehension of the story and have them practice the dialogue using their puppets. If you are not an artist you had better consult an art teacher or a friend to help you draw and color the flash cards. Ask the learners to bring their own toys to English class. Use “show and tell” technique presentation that gives students a chance to introduce their objects in English. Since young learners have short attention spans , it is recommended to move quickly from activity to activity. Do not stay more than 10 minutes on any single activity because children tend to become bored easily. It is a good idea to use thematic unit planning because it builds a larger context within which students can learn language. When teaching English to young learners this way, you can incorporate many activities, songs, and stories that build on students’ knowledge and recycle language throughout the unit.

2. References:

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