

Reflections on teaching young learners

Annamaria Pinter introduces our theme with some thoughts on some key areas.

Who are they?

Who is a young learner? Who is a child? Who is a teenager? Terminology can be confusing because different writers use different labels for describing young learners. For the purposes of this piece, the focus is on those children who learn English as a second or foreign language in a primary/elementary school, in most contexts between the age ranges of 5–13 years, although there are vast differences across countries and learning contexts. In many contexts, children learn English formally in preschools and kindergartens as well (under the age of 5); and in some contexts, primary education stretches beyond the early teenage years.

The English fever

Teaching English to children has become the accepted norm all over the world, and learning English in elementary schools is seen by most parents as one of the most important investments for a brighter future. Even very young children are sent to private schools and cram schools to be exposed to English classes often outside what is offered in their state primary curriculum. Parents in some countries spend extortionate amounts of money on their children's English education. It is like a fever and a never-ending competition.

With a solid belief that English is indispensable for all children, however, interestingly enough comes almost no concern for teaching quality. In many contexts around the world, almost anybody can teach English to children, such as those who are lacking any

teaching qualification whatsoever but happen to be native speakers of English, or those who lack competence in English but happen to be working as teachers of other subjects in a primary school. Almost all teachers of English at some point in their career turn their hands to teaching children, but most will move on as soon as they can. This is understandable because teachers of English who work with children in most contexts have lower status, lower pay and fewer opportunities than their colleagues working with older learners, either in the secondary sector or at colleges and universities.

Are young learners better at learning languages than adults?

The rush to teach English to children, at whatever cost, is explained by the commonly held belief that children are superior language learners compared to adults. This observation is based on the experiences of a typical immigrant family, where older members of the family find it harder to settle in and learn a new language, while the young children of the family seem to fit into local schools with relative ease and seem to pick up language and native-like pronunciation relatively quickly. The basic belief is that being young, receptive and flexible, children can simply soak up a second or foreign language without much effort. While this widely held belief is not at all backed up by empirical research, it is true to say that children do enjoy some benefits as language learners. However, the irony is that children can only reap these benefits of learning

at a young age if certain conditions are met in the learning environment. For example, children are believed to pick up intonation patterns and pronunciation more readily than adults because of their lack of inhibition, their willingness and ability to imitate sounds and intonation patterns, and because their phonological systems in their L1 are less established. However, if the teacher's spoken competence in English is modest, the question arises about whether there is anything useful to soak up. To pick up language effortlessly children also need a great deal of rich input. Immigrant children often spend long hours at school and in the playground surrounded by English and they also hear English in shops, on buses and on the television and other media. But if English is only taught once or twice a week for 45 minutes at a time, we cannot really talk about sufficient exposure to English in a foreign language context. It could be argued that just two hours a week is so little in terms of input that it hardly makes a difference.

Children are rarely motivated to learn English for clear external reasons like adults, such as to get a better job or to study abroad. Instead, their motivation is immediate, comes from 'within' and it feeds on fun, games and other enjoyable experiences. Children are motivated when the activities the teacher plans are engaging, but again, teachers who often lack basic qualifications in teaching methodology and/or child psychology cannot be expected to create motivating learning environments and may even put the children off learning English and other languages at an early age.

Exposure to English

It is not possible to make a great deal of progress in just one or two hours a week and yet this is how much time most teachers have with one class. If the time devoted to English is limited and outside the teacher's control, then it is important to think about how this limited time can be used to maximum benefit. Access to technology might help. Children may be able to continue their learning outside the classroom with motivating activities. Children live and breathe technology and they find using iPads, interactive whiteboards or any other technology highly motivating. When it comes to extra exposure to English outside the classroom, the younger ones can watch YouTube versions of their favourite stories read in class, while the older ones can search the internet in preparation for project work to be completed in class. Even at younger ages, it is possible to record short role plays on mobile devices, listen to them, re-record them for extra practice and think about how to record an improved version. Taking control of the recording device gives ownership to the learner and this leads to more motivation to learn. The currently available easy-to-use mobile technologies represent in my view excellent opportunities for increasing children's motivation to learn as well as enjoy more practice, more rich input and thus offer more overall exposure to English.

Content ideas: include creativity, music and rhythm and rhyme

Rhythm, rhyme, music and creativity are key components of success with children. New language is easier to remember when it is presented through rhyme and rhythm. Simple poems, action rhymes and songs with clapping or miming will appeal to children. Practising this way is stress-free and fun and using mime, movement and picture prompts will help to cater for learners with different learning styles because these activities naturally incorporate visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning opportunities. Drama and acting out are much enjoyed by most children until about the age of 8–10 when most children suddenly become much more



self-conscious. Older children will be more likely to take interest in pop songs and youth culture, films and art, and explore these interests through English.

Content idea: include stories

Stories are great supplementary materials and they come in all shapes and sizes for all age groups. Even the youngest children will enjoy listening to simple stories in English. With props and picture books designed for shared reading, or video materials, simple stories can be made accessible to even beginners. Stories are universally enjoyed by everyone and they are authentic in that they offer exciting learning experiences with suspense, unpredictability, sometimes with humour and a satisfying resolution. Children will enjoy listening to the same stories over and over again and this naturally leads to opportunities for learning new language through joining in with the story telling, repeating key phrases and hearing rich English input. Stories are also important because they provide opportunities for children to come in contact with texts that are longer than the typical basic diet you get in children's coursebooks.

Once a story is familiar, it is possible to act out parts of it, memorise an often repetitive dialogue sequence, make drawings/illustrations, create a

new ending, or write your own story inspired by the original text. There are many authentic stories that can be used straightaway. In fact the excellent illustrations in children's books, as well as the context in the stories, helps children follow the story just enough to enjoy it. It is not always important to understand every word, and children are often more willing to cope with a bit of uncertainty or partial understanding as compared to adults. However, if the original story is too complicated and the language is too complex, often it is possible to simplify and modify original stories to make them suitable for lower level learners. Too much rewriting and simplification can sometimes take away the charm and the authentic appeal of the story, so this needs to be thought about carefully. From short story books, older children can progress to graded readers, and fiction or non-fiction of all kinds, including adventure or crime stories, fantasy fiction, or information books about animals, dinosaurs or planets, depending on children's interests. The internet is also an excellent reading resource. I am familiar with young L2 learners of English who read BBC football reports and football related news regularly because it is now readily available at the click of a button. Others read and follow young writers on Harry Potter fan websites and even attempt to write and upload their own creative pieces.

Making choices

Children need to be able to take some control of their language learning. Choice is an important first step towards taking more and more responsibility and towards making decisions. Once a child has chosen an exercise, a text or a story, a psychological bond is created. Because a choice has been made, the activity will be carried out with more intense engagement than all those tasks that are mandatory for everyone. The more children are allowed to make choices and the more they are able to observe the consequences of their choices, the more they can develop as reflective learners and understand their own strengths and weaknesses. This awareness and the ability to reflect on one's learning link very closely with learner autonomy and developing 21st century skills. In any one classroom, teachers need to work with a variety of levels, needs and interests, and therefore individualised learning becomes important. It is good to encourage children to work collaboratively: sometimes in groups where members are all of the same language/ability level, and sometimes where more able learners can support weaker learners with specific language tasks.

Playing games such as finding the differences between two pictures in pairs can be motivating because children suddenly realise they are able to make themselves understood in English and can use spontaneous English. Getting them to think about how to play the game well, such as by listening to each other carefully, looking for differences in a systematic manner and double-checking each other's interpretations, will help them play the game better and will make them more reflective learners. Naturally, older children (above the age of 8–9 years) are more willing and able to stand back and think about the activities they engage in.

Listening to children's opinions

Teachers should try to get to know the children they are working with well. They can observe them working in

groups inside classrooms and playing outside classrooms. Teachers of English should also make meaningful links between English and the rest of the curriculum, and make an effort to understand what the children are doing in other subjects. All this understanding will help teachers make good choices about suitable materials. In addition, children's opinions and feedback about English learning is an important source of learning for teachers. Many teachers think that they know the children well enough to make all the decisions in their classrooms without consulting the children. However, once they ask the children's opinions regularly, teachers are often surprised how insightful children can be and how they can contribute useful and unexpected ideas and viewpoints about teaching, materials, activities or other aspects of learning English. From an ethical point of view, it is our duty as teachers to understand children's perceptions and ideas as much from the children's point of view as possible. This is only possible if teachers are willing to take a close look at their own assumptions about childhood and if they are willing to develop relationships and invest time into working together with children on a more equal basis. Children can contribute powerful ideas when they get the chance to have their voices heard about their English classes.

Teachers make the biggest difference

Teachers are role models and their English competence as well as their relationship with the learners is important for children. Some children might like English just because they like the English teacher. Children of different ages change their views about what good teachers are like, but even teenagers admit they like a subject purely because they consider a teacher funny or like him or her for some other reason.

Teachers often complain that their contexts are limiting, e.g. they only teach one or two hours of English

a week per class, they do not think the prescribed textbook is suitable, or the curriculum is too demanding, or the tests are inappropriate, or the resources are lacking. No matter what the restrictions are, though, teachers must remember that they themselves make the biggest difference to the children's success/motivation. Good teachers find a way despite pressing difficulties and restrictions. I have myself been much inspired by teachers who enjoyed working with children in under-resourced contexts without textbooks in impossibly large classes. One teacher in an African context gathered the children around trees, away from the heat, and set up group work that the children took charge of. Another teacher in China, because paper was expensive and scarce, asked the children to bring in old newspapers from home to make posters, to cut out shapes and to build board games. The teacher's creativity, his or her ability to make something out of nothing, can be contagious and children will have fun and contribute their ideas to take these creative activities further. Accepting the restrictions of your local context while embracing the opportunities is the teacher's most important task.



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