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## Teaching English in the primary classroom

A number of initiatives to introduce early foreign language learning into primary schools have shown that exposure to a foreign language and culture can be a rewarding experience, as children take great delight in discovering a new world which will open up their horizons. The advantages of an early start have been widely acknowledged by both research and evidence from language classrooms. It is important though to explore some key issues involved in the way children learn foreign languages and the implications that the qualities of children bear on the teaching methodology and the choice of materials that will be implemented in the teaching process. The qualities of the teacher are inevitably crucial for the appropriate approach to the diverse qualities and learning styles of primary school children. While teaching at the primary level, it becomes evident that children vary greatly in their ability to take part in activities and their language achievement. Differentiating the teaching practice in plausible ways can contribute to more successful outcomes than if the teacher focused on the average achievers, excluding thus the high and low achievers.

### Early foreign language learning

The advantages associated with early foreign language learning are widely accepted and that is how the introduction of foreign language programmes into the primary curriculum in various countries is justified. The importance of implementing early foreign language learning in primary schools has been recognised based on a number of key issues that affect the whole attitude to language learning. To be more specific, some reasons for starting to learn a foreign language at a young age are the following (Brewster et al. 2002; Cameron 2001; Halliwell 1992; Moon 2000):

- ◆ Children have fewer inhibitions than adults and feel more inclined to participate in classroom activities without fear of making mistakes.
- ◆ They have no pre-conceptions and no stereotypical images of the target culture and the people associated with it.
- ◆ While exposed to another culture, the cultural gains are endless; finding out about other styles of life broadens their own perspective and outlook about the world.
- ◆ They attain a more enriched knowledge of verbal and non-verbal behaviour.

- ◆ They act as sponges to whatever is said around them.
- ◆ They are good at imitating what they hear and will attempt to imitate the teacher's model of pronunciation.
- ◆ They understand their own language system a lot better through exposure to a foreign language early in life.
- ◆ Learning is perceived as an enjoyable experience due to their involvement in indirect learning through game-like activities and fluency-focused tasks.
- ◆ Learning takes place in a relaxed atmosphere, which to a certain extent resembles natural language acquisition.
- ◆ The focus is on the promotion of listening and speaking, while reading and writing are of secondary importance.
- ◆ Early foreign language learning instils confidence in young learners who strive toward language learning achievement.

## **How children learn foreign languages**

When we consider the process that takes place when children learn to use their mother tongue, we talk about subconscious learning, referred to as acquisition. This process entails natural exposure to the language, which is gained through experience. On the other hand, the foreign language is learnt through direct teaching, and a conscious effort is made to learn that particular language within the classroom context. Children acquiring their mother tongue are exposed to the language from the very first day of their lives and are encouraged to use the language to convey messages, due to the need to negotiate meaning. Fluency and spontaneous use of the language are often associated with first language acquisition, whereas accuracy is associated with language learning. The opportunities that children are granted to listen to comprehensible input and to test their own hypotheses about the language system are limitless. On the other hand, the classroom context offers insufficient opportunities for continuous exposure, as the main source of input is the one provided by the teacher.

There seems to be a certain order regarding how language learning takes place no matter whether we are concerned with first language acquisition or second/foreign language learning (i.e. we can refer to the process of the development of the first and/or second/ foreign language as first language development and second/foreign language development, avoiding thus the distinction between acquisition and learning). The order in which the various skills are developed is: listening, speaking, reading and writing. In other words, the teacher should:

- ◆ provide the necessary comprehensible input, accompanied by contextual cues (i.e. the development of the listening skill).
- ◆ prompt the learners to respond in an appropriate way, resorting to appropriate language use (i.e. the development of the speaking skill).
- ◆ acquaint the learners with the written mode of the language (i.e. the development of the reading skill).

- ◆ encourage the learners to engage in writing activities; i.e. controlled writing in the beginning leading to free writing as an ultimate aim (i.e. the development of the writing skill).

This is the order in which children acquire their mother tongue as well; it sounds only natural that foreign language learners will need to go through similar stages to reach language learning outcomes, even in the case of systematic language learning which takes place in the confined classroom environment.

Once children become full-members of the language classroom, their talents and qualities become evident. Once you acknowledge their existence, these qualities have far-reaching methodological and pedagogical implications. While taking into account how children learn foreign languages and what qualities they bring to the classroom, we can isolate the following as the most important (Brewster et al. 2002; Halliwell 1992; Moon 2000):

- ◆ They learn better when the focus is on meaning.

Children seem to retain aspects of the language when they are involved in guessing, rather than when they are explicitly told what a particular word means. This is why the use of translation is not regarded as the best solution to providing explanations of unknown vocabulary items. It is the associations that they make in their minds that seem to make these lexical items memorable. What is considered preferable is to prompt learners to guess the meaning of unknown words from the context, placing importance on the completion of the task and not on the language being used. In this case, learners experience subconscious learning and engage in spontaneous language use.

The benefits of subconscious learning can be appreciated once properly applied in the language classroom. You need to set up activities that engage learners in real language use, promoting fluency and training them how to learn, while guiding them towards autonomous learning. Instances of indirect learning can take place in game-like activities, which are not merely seen as a way of rewarding learners for their good behaviour or a way of relaxing at the end of the lesson; games should promote real language use, offering pleasure and language practice at the same time. Role-playing activities also provide a stimulus for real language use, as learners make an effort to concentrate on how to convey their inner thoughts more successfully.

- ◆ They learn when actively involved.

Children have an enormous capacity for learning through being actively involved in language learning tasks. Experience triggers memory and brings to the surface what they have been taught at some point. Active learning can be experienced through games, role-playing, action songs, etc.

- ◆ They learn when their senses are involved.

As children learn through experiencing the world around them, it becomes apparent that they need to be constantly stimulated for their senses to be activated in an attempt to make their learning more easily retained in their memory. Thus, you should grant opportunities to your learners to make use of their five senses: to hear, to see, to smell, to touch and to taste. Therefore, careful selection of activities can expose the learners to a learning experience in which all their senses will be activated.

- ◆ They are quick to decipher meaning from context.

While growing up children learn how to use their surroundings to deduce meaning; they rely on visual clues, such as pictures, body language and facial expressions depending on the particular context. Deducing meaning from context is one of their strong points, while striving to make sense of what is said or read. Their reliance on clues to make sense of the world around them is also adopted for the successful participation in the various tasks in the classroom context. That is why the input provided has to be appropriately supported to help the learners understand the meaning of the messages put forward. It is obvious that decontextualised use of language will inevitably require direct translation to ensure learner understanding, while at the same time depriving learners of valuable input.

- ◆ They can become more effective learners when reflective learning is part of teaching.

Learning how to learn encourages learners to reflect upon their learning and to consider ways of tackling language learning issues more effectively. However, learners cannot undertake reflective learning without being constantly prompted by the teacher and guided toward that direction. Encouraging learners to work out the rules of grammar for themselves, asking them reviewing questions (e.g. 'What did you learn today?'), and prompting them to consider what they liked most or least in a lesson (e.g. 'Did you like the lesson today?') are some ways in which the learners can be sensitised towards how they are coping with the language and the progress they are making. Attempts made to incorporate reflective learning as part of the teaching process guide learners towards independent learning and responsible behaviour.

- ◆ They learn best when they assume responsibility for their own learning.

Considering possible strategies that would help foster responsible and independent learning could prove helpful to your teaching as the learners will take initiatives and work at their own pace. Engagement in activities and projects that offer opportunities for the tracing of particular information can encourage learner initiative, instil responsibility, and display their creativity. Pair- and group-work activities prompt learners to consider ways of overcoming obstacles, while attempting to find plausible solutions to the tasks undertaken.

- ◆ They react positively to language learning when properly motivated and stimulated.

Stimulating the learners in a proper way can be a very challenging and rewarding experience for all parties involved. Undoubtedly, learners can derive great pleasure once the activities have an unpredictability element, while offering opportunities for their imagination to be stimulated. Story-telling and fun activities can motivate them to learn, as the focus will be on participating in various activities rather than on the language component. In other words, even though the language focus is embedded in these activities, it does not become apparent to the learners.

- ◆ They love talking.

The desire to communicate is quite evident in children who love talking about themselves, their family, their friends, their pets and their interests. If you provide them with occasions that urge them to communicate, they will find some way to put their message

across. Even if they have few resources available they can prove to be very inventive to make their listener understand. The unpredictability element that is involved encourages real language use and the learners feel that they are indeed actively involved in the learning process. Pair- and group-work activities will encourage the learners to use the target language without fearing of being interrupted.

- ◆ They enjoy having fun and doing things from which they can derive pleasure.

Bearing in mind that children are quite young and that they want to play and have a good time, the teaching has to be a pleasurable experience that develops their curiosity and positive attitude towards foreign language learning. Therefore, this is closely linked with the need for indirect learning, involving them in activities that will give them the opportunity to enjoy themselves while learning is taking place. Listening to songs and stories, participating in game-like activities, and acting out a certain role are just a few of the activities that stimulate learners' interest and encourage learner participation.

- ◆ They have a short concentration span.

As children have a short concentration span, they need to be constantly challenged and stimulated, so that their interest will not be diminished throughout the lesson. Keeping them alert is a key issue within the context of the primary classroom. Learners' subsequent behaviour is highly influenced by the teacher's personality, the methodology adopted and their attitude to teaching and learning. Thus, incorporating a variety of stimulating activities that would help vary the pace according to the mood of the class (i.e. the 'stir up' and 'settle' factor (Halliwell 1992)) can help you overcome any problems that may arise due to the learners' short concentration span. As learners grow older, their span increases with time and they can be involved in activities that they may need to work on for a certain amount of time.

- ◆ They forget quickly.

Children tend to forget quickly, because they are exposed to a number of things simultaneously, rendering it impossible for them to retain all the knowledge that they are expected to be responsible for. At the same time, the learners' perception of the teaching point of the lesson may not coincide with the real teaching aims, because they may have a different understanding of the whole teaching situation. Frequent repetitions and recycling of the language could help overcome this obstacle, particularly as repetitions in various contexts could act as a memory aid; at the same time, difficult issues need to be explicitly pointed out, so that the learners will not have any misconceptions about the learning process. Raising learners' awareness of the teaching points of the lesson is of crucial importance for subsequent learning and should be undertaken during the various stages of the lesson.

## Qualities of children

Children vary greatly depending on their age, abilities, learning styles, family background, and interests. What is quite astonishing is connected with the children's age; the changes that children undergo up to the age of ten are dramatic. Furthermore, all children do not grow

at the same pace; even though children can be of the same age, their mental age could vary to a great extent. Their conceptual development (i.e. the concepts that they are aware of in their mother tongue) depends on the kind of stimuli that they are exposed to and the parental influence and support provided. Therefore, when you consider teaching children, you should take into account the existence of multi-leveled classes and how you will deal with them. The issue of mixed ability is closely connected to the natural abilities that the children bring to the classroom; however, on certain occasions, you have to consider the diversity in their proficiency level which may arise due to prior language instruction.

Dividing children into two distinct age groups makes it easier to understand what they bring to the classroom and what their age entails for the teaching methodology that will be adopted. This kind of division is done only for analytical purposes, bearing in mind that this only highlights the differences among the various age groups; it is quite likely that children of a particular age group may exhibit certain qualities, showing greater maturity than others.

If we look closely at the children themselves, we can discern many characteristics in the children of the different age groups; the qualities and characteristics of learners bear implications for the language teaching methodology employed in the classroom context.

### ***Five to seven year olds***

The children who belong to this age group may share some of the following characteristics (Dean 1992; Scott and Ytreberg 1990):

- They are very egocentric and tend to enjoy talking about themselves.
- They consider things for what they are and cannot detect hidden meanings.
- The outcome of their actions is not among the things that they can talk about.
- The boundaries between what is real and what is not may not be discernible.
- They can retell what they have heard.
- Their imagination is quite active; it can be used for language teaching purposes effectively.
- They can use deductive thinking.
- They are good at explaining why they have a certain line of thinking.
- They have a short concentration span.
- They show enthusiasm in participating in activities.
- They are stubborn and rarely admit that they are wrong.
- They have an acute awareness of the rules imposed by the world around them, even though they may not make sense of these rules.

### ***Eight to eleven year olds***

The older children get, the more qualities they have, reflecting a more whole person. Thus, children will have some of the following characteristics (Dean 1992; Scott and Ytreberg 1990):

- Their cognitive development is nearly completed as most of the key concepts are already known to them from their mother tongue context. In other words, they can understand abstract notions.
- The acquisition of their mother tongue is nearly completed.
- They can draw the line between what is real and what is not.
- They can show initiative and select activities that could be useful for the learning process.
- They understand the rules that are imposed by superiors.
- They can express a certain opinion, draw conclusions and clarify ambiguities.
- They can use their logic to make sense of various issues.
- They can decide upon a certain course of action.
- They are quick to pick up inconsistencies in the teacher's behaviour and question the teacher's decisions.
- They can evaluate circumstances based on quantitative and qualitative criteria.

## Qualities of the teacher

Undoubtedly the teacher is a person who has a certain personality. Certain abilities and attitudes can be developed and others can be consciously brought about. The teacher has to consider what the learners bring to the classroom and what this entails for his/her teaching practice. Therefore, upon careful consideration of the teaching situation, the teacher should strive towards his/her professional development and growth, while catering for the needs of the learners.

The portrait of the ideal primary school teacher (with particular reference to the teacher of English as a foreign language) would have to include certain qualities to make this person able and effective in his/her teaching practice. In other words, he/she would have to be:

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| • skilful (e.g. to sing, to draw)      | • responsible    | • friendly     |
| • attentive to learner needs           | • respectful     | • firm         |
| • co-operative with learners and staff | • well-organised | • resourceful  |
| • methodologically aware               | • self-confident | • hard-working |
| • well-informed                        | • flexible       | • caring       |
| • fond of children                     | • open-minded    | • creative     |
| • well-prepared                        | • consistent     | • energetic    |
| • aware of children's psychology       | • patient        | • fair         |
| • proficient in the foreign language   | • supportive     | • encouraging  |
| • authoritative                        | • confident      | • cheerful     |

You may not have all these abilities developed to an acceptable degree, but you could try to develop some of these, such as assuming certain roles, drawing stick figures on

the chalkboard, etc. Bearing in mind what your strong points are, you can contemplate ways of improving your weak points, so that you can make use of all the possibilities that could supplement your teaching, making it an enjoyable experience for all parties involved. Reflective thinking on your part prior to, during and after the lesson will help you to deal with circumstantial problems and to improve your own teaching techniques.

It is important to create a secure environment, in which the children will feel sheltered; in other words, you should try to establish a classroom, which is conducive to language learning. To make learners feel secure, you have to consider a number of parameters which could influence subsequent learning. Here are some of the things that could assist you in establishing a learner-friendly and supportive environment (Scott and Ytreberg 1990; Underwood 1987):

- Respect the learners for what they bring to the classroom and for who they are.
- Establish routines that make them feel comfortable (e.g. you should have a pattern to start the lesson with).
- Encourage co-operation and avoid competition.
- Assign responsibility tasks to the learners (e.g. you could use a rotation pattern to arrange the desks prior to the lesson).
- Reward good performance and behaviour to raise their self-esteem but avoid physical rewards.
- Give equal opportunities to your learners.
- Be willing to accept what learners say and try to be tactful when you correct them.
- Make an effort to learn learners' names as this will create a friendly relationship with them.
- Ask learners whether they welcome the idea of having their names anglicised, because changing their names could result in a change of identity.
- Welcome learner initiative and listen to their requests.

### **Multi-leveled classes**

As mentioned earlier, children vary greatly in terms of their abilities and achievement, which subsequently affect their overall achievement. How can you deal with these differences? Concentrating on high achievers could entail excluding average and low achievers. High achievers would need to be constantly challenged, whereas the low achievers would need your guidance and help. Your role in managing the situation is of paramount importance, as you would have to train the learners how to behave in order to allow enough time for their classmates to formulate their answers without disrupting the flow of the lesson.

One possible solution that you could consider is to include all the learners in the learning process by taking certain steps to accommodate for the differences among your learners; this could be achieved by incorporating differentiation in classroom activities.



Differentiation means looking at language classrooms with a critical eye, and once differences among the learners are located, it is believed that a varied and flexible learning environment has to be created. By differentiating language learning tasks, it seems that different learners will be able to access a lot more information, while you are interested in the success of the class as a whole and the achievement of individual learners.

Differentiated learning can be organised in various ways depending on what we want to achieve (Ainslie 1994; Convery and Coyle 1999; Moon 2000). What follows suggests a few ways in which differentiated learning can take place:

- **By varying the support:** you can vary the additional support that you provide learners with. The type of support can be different depending on the situation (i.e. (a) you can decide to provide personal help to one particular group, (b) you can give the instructions in the mother tongue, (c) you can offer additional clues and (d) you can provide language support.
- **By varying the task:** you can arrange for the learners to work on the same topic or text but they may work on tasks of a varied difficulty level based on their abilities. The outcome of the task is either the same or quite similar. Thus, while engaged in a writing activity, the more proficient learners may answer open-ended questions, whereas the less proficient learners may answer closed questions.
- **By considering the learners' interests:** you can encourage learners to carry out a project that would allow them to develop some responsibility for their own learning, while engaged in an activity that may reflect their interests. In this case, learners who are granted the opportunity to explore their interests may be more motivated to contribute.
- **By considering the learners' learning styles:** you can choose a variety of activities that would suit the learners' various learning styles. You may not please all your learners at the same time, but the variety incorporated will cater for individual preferences.
- **By varying the learning outcome:** You can guide the task in such a way so that all learners will come to the same conclusions but the procedure adopted could be different (e.g. some could be involved in a free writing exercise whereas others could answer questions on a text).

Group-work allows for individual attention and encourages learners to take charge of their own learning. While engaged in group-work activities, the learners can progress at their own rate. The learners can become supportive of each other and develop co-operative spirit. The opportunities to contribute increase and domineering personalities dominate over a small group of learners. It appears that more reluctant participants will feel more at ease to participate in the sheltered setting of a group-work activity. Your role should be to monitor their work, providing help when it is considered essential; at the same time, you can provide individual attention without overburdening the whole class. However, there are some options that you could consider before conducting group-work:

- Ask learners of the same proficiency level to sit together, so that you can assign them activities of varying difficulty.
- Ask low achievers to work with higher achievers; low achievers will learn from the learners whose proficiency level is higher.
- Allow learners to choose whom they would like to work with.
- Put together learners who work well if they are in the same group.
- Vary the members of groups.

Another way of dealing with multi-leveled classes is achieved through the careful planning of homework tasks. The assignment of homework allows the learners to assume some responsibility for their learning and to work at their own pace. Homework tasks could vary depending on the proficiency level of the class in question. What this entails is that you must have considered a variation of the assignment that you plan the class to work on. Normally, teachers choose a homework task which is the same for the whole class; this becomes valid, only if we consider that all learners have the same proficiency level and that they progress at the same rate. Once you acknowledge the fact that the class consists of mixed proficiency learners, you have to contemplate ways of catering for individual needs. Thus, you should consider the following:

- Give clear instructions and make sure that learners understand what they are expected to do. Ask one of the learners to tell the rest of the class (even in the mother tongue) what the homework assignment is. Give an example if necessary.
- Write the homework assignment on the chalkboard. The learners will have no excuse for not doing the assignment as they are expected to copy down what is written on the chalkboard. You could also check that they have done so.
- Assign different homework assignments based on their proficiency level so that all learners will benefit from doing the tasks.
- Make sure that the tasks are linked with what was previously taught.
- Consider the tasks carefully, so that all learners will tackle the assignment.
- Offer ample practice before you assign homework.

Even though learners are allowed to pursue something which interests them or which is within their grasp, it is important for them to feel secure and that their contributions matter. You should make sure that you display their work (i.e. the work of all learners based on achievement and effort put on a task) in the classroom to help raise their self-esteem and to ensure that the differentiation adopted is not perceived as discrimination. Learners' qualities and talents should be of prime importance while contemplating the best possible methodology to tackle the teaching situation. Differentiating the language learning process can assist both you and the learners in the pursuit of successful learning outcomes.