

METHODOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

In the development period of methods, teaching English had a rather uniform approach to all age groups. Nevertheless, during the turn of the century teaching English to young learners became a specialized teaching fashion based on the principles evolved during methods era. It has now its own priorities, teaching modes, and materials. Young learners' age characteristics make it a holistic approach rather than being analytic. Categorization of children into age groups is a complicated task due to the same reason. The development of the teaching approach and a grade-based categorization of the target group are the main topics in this argument

Key Words: *teaching English, young learners, methodology, age groups*

Çocuklara İngilizce Öğretiminin Yöntembilimsel Gelişimi

Özet

Çocuklara yabancı dil öğretimi uygulama açısından yabancı dil yöntemlerinin geliştirildiği dönemde ortaya çıkan esasları temel almaktadır. Yöntemler döneminde üretilen teknikler ve ders malzemeleri daha çok tek tip olarak tasarlanmıştır. Yöntemler sonrası dönemde çocuklara yabancı dil öğretimi uygulamalı dilbiliminin bir alt disiplini olarak kendi gelişim sürecini başlatmış ve belirgin hale gelmiştir. Bugün seçmeci yaklaşımın tanıdığı olanaklar ile çocuklara uluslararası bir dil olarak İngilizce öğretimi olgunluk dönemine girmektedir. Tamamen çocuklar için tasarlanmış öğretim teknikleri, malzemeler ve öğretim ortamları tasarlanmakta ve çoğalmaktadır. Bu çalışma çocuklara yabancı dil olarak İngilizce öğretiminin gelişimini ve yaş gruplarının özelliklerini tartışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *İngilizce öğretimi, çocuklar, yöntembilim, yaş grupları*

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Introduction

Teaching English as a foreign language to young learners (TEFLYL) is a growing sub-discipline in Applied Linguistics. Although there was not much theoretical emphasis on it in methods era, it has gained remarkable popularity today and also considerable amount of literature has been produced so far. This discussion attempts to review the methodological growth and main aspects of teaching English to young learners.

Young Learners and Foreign languages

Learning or acquiring a foreign language is among the vital educational needs of children. They will definitely need good command of foreign language during their education. It is the same for their future job experiences since no business activity remains local anymore. In this vein a young learner should be equipped definitely with at least one international foreign language in order to be able to use personal capacity in life fully. Lack of language ability for communication of this sort will hinder them from using job and life opportunities that will come up. In other words, learning foreign languages may help them better plan their lives socially, academically, and professionally.

EFL

An internationally accepted and used foreign language such as English is vital for their education not only for the sake of learning a foreign language but learning other subjects at all levels of schooling due to the symbiotic interdisciplinary relationships that may exist between courses and a lingua franca. English which is an undeniable necessity of this century may function as an interface between school subjects, life skills, and all other sorts of developmental courses of action which lead to create competent and independent young individuals. At the same time such a tool will develop their knowledge of the world in many ways. In conclusion, English as lingua franca may play a binding role as described above and help young learners recognize their own path of improvement and available developmental skills.

Methods Era

In the theatre of methodological developments observed in the 20th Century which shaped TEFL, many significant methods can be examined. The methods appeared in this period can be categorized in many different ways depending on different perspectives such as behaviorist or cognitive, structural or communicative, teacher centered or learner centered, etc. The methods developed in this era had a principal teaching approach that shaped the techniques under them. However, excluding some attempts in the last decades of this era, most of the trends were geared to a general level of schooling with no very specific emphasis to young learners.

Post Methods Era

Parallel to the modernist and post-modernist discussions and development of eclectic thinking in FLT the strict adherence to one method has lost its popularity. The innovative

and new teaching techniques developed and suggested by the teachers or other sources such as the textbooks and theoretical shortcomings evident in the chosen methods and possible use of better applications and techniques of other methods have played an important role in the transition to eclectic approach. This evolution was an important step in the liberation of TEFLYL as a sub-discipline with its own pool of eclectic and age-group-specific teaching techniques.

Methodological Eclecticism

The skepticism about depending on a single method has led TEFL to employ many teaching techniques taken from different methods in a new composition. Such an eclectic combination may better fulfill the learners' needs which can be very different in various teaching settings. This type of flexibility is the most suitable aspect for methodological formulation of teaching a foreign language to young learners. TEFLYL had to evolve from using general teaching techniques used for all age groups to using its own techniques such as teaching through games, songs, puzzles, crafts, stories, drama and other techniques suitable for children. TEFLYL eclectically include all children friendly foreign language teaching techniques in its collection of instructional tools. This pragmatic approach which is essential due to the characteristics young learners has made TEFLYL one of the most specialized teaching approaches. TEFLYL obligatorily has developed as an interdisciplinary approach for the same reason above. Due to the young age of the target group it collaborates with many other relevant disciplines such as education, psychology, art design, interior design, management, and others. In this vein, perspectives such as VAK (Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic), Multiple Intelligences Theory, emotional intelligence, task based teaching, inquiry based teaching, quantum teaching are considered in TEFLYL.

Towards Individual Centered Instruction

The continuous developments (Sarigöz, 2008) in EFL and the developments in other disciplines of education dictate a fundamental central change. The learner centered teaching mode which was a revolution in EFLT has brought a new understanding to foreign language instruction. However this change has been perceived and conceptualized as class centered or group centered in many teaching settings. The recent educational theories which are mostly inspired by constructivism tend to change the focus of instruction again by putting the individual learner in the center. In FLT classes today it is essential to consider the personal realm of every individual learner in the group. In other words, the target language should be operated by the students for all language functions meaningfully in life-like simulations to be created in the classroom. With young learners who are immature and more self-centered than the older learners the importance of planning teaching is double-fold. The syllabus, the notions and functions, teaching techniques are considerably different than other learner groups. The learning experience for young learners should be mostly based on the activities in daily routine of children and everything that they enjoy doing.

Argondizzo (1992, p. 4) points out that a learner centered approach should be adopted in classes for children, and communication topics, language and situations to be introduced should be geared to their age. The things they talk about, the language patterns they employ, and the play settings they like are among the issues which have priority. In the language learning activities she devised for children, Argondizzo attempts to bridge the gap between process strategies in child L2 acquisition and the FL classroom. She states that a period of silence, the use of meaningful imitation, and the successive use of creative speech take place in the process of language acquisition in children exposed to a second language in an English speaking country. Generally parents and teachers motivate children to learn a foreign language. Autonomous motivation appears and increases as they are engaged in more and more activities.

Literacy development in classes for children is of great importance. Hudelson (1994) argues that when students are reading story books they have a general picture of the story through matching the illustrations and printed words. This process increases their attention to the print, lexicon, and sentences. Moreover, they understand that writing is functional and they can use it for their own purposes such as writing birthday cards.

Phillips (1993) argues that teaching English as a foreign language to young learners depends on their developmental stages. The recommended age range given for activities should not be taken as a hard rule. Children's maturity is influenced by many factors such as their environment, culture, their sex, and the expectations of their classmates and parents. She states that younger children are more holistic than the older ones, and this makes them respond to the meaning of the language used rather than individual words or sentences. Johnson (1994) states that interaction strategies must be principled and creative. The principles should be derived from the studies about how children learn. She says that children learn through play and motivation.

Teaching

Across the world young learners start learning foreign languages when they do not know how to read and write. This makes TEFLYL a very demanding approach from the very beginning. In schooling young learners can be divided into three groups. They are very young learners, 1-4 graders, and 5-8 graders. TEFLYL applications should recognize personal requirements of all these stages and offer instruction accordingly.

Very Young Learners

Very young learners are pre-school children who attend nursery classes. They do not read and write. Their classes may have different design. Some have wall to wall carpeting with cushions on the ground. Their classes are like play rooms for children. Some classes have moving chairs or moving desks suitable for individual work, pair-work, and group work. Both types have space for play, games, painting, and performing crafts besides other activities for children. Most of them have shelves for colored picture books and displaying crafts. There is space on the walls for displaying students' work.

The materials designed for them contain pictures, picture stories, coloring tasks, cut and paste activities, self-sticking picture story tasks, puppets, pictured vocabulary charts, ordering tasks, puzzles, picture stories with guessing tasks, singing tasks, and other activities which children enjoy doing. None of these materials contains written words. Reilly and Ward (1997, pp. 6-9) point out that very young learners may require close attention of the teacher. For instance, during coloring and painting the teacher may elicit some vocabulary and create communication. Attention span can last five to ten minutes. A silent period may be necessary before language acquisition. They argue that it is not necessary to have a strict syllabus and program. A fast pace is not recommended and repetitions may help if they enjoy the task. The difficulty of teaching abstract concepts may require the use of Total Physical Response. Philips (1993, p. 5) argues that listening takes most of the class time with very young learners.

Halliwell (1992, p. 3) states that children never attend the language class with empty hands. They come with well-constructed set of instincts, skills, and characteristics that will assist them when learning a new language. They are good at using limited language creatively and have a holistic approach to meaning. They can learn indirectly and enjoy talking. Scott and Ytreberg (1990, pp. 2-3) state that five to seven year olds can plan activities, employ logical reasoning and are good at using imagination. They utilize language skills long before they consciously notice them.

One to Fourth Graders

This group starts schooling by learning alphabet and developing reading and writing skills. The activities for this stage should be child friendly. Their interlanguage is very limited however their language learning ability should not be underestimated. They do not analyze the input grammatically in the beginning due to their holistic approach to learning. Nevertheless if well adjusted and fun-and-games centered activities are offered it is a very advantageous stage for foreign language instruction.

Learners develop meta-cognitive skills during the first years of schooling. Scott and Ytreberg (1990, pp. 3-4) argue that eight to ten year olds shape their basic concepts and develop views of the world. They can work with peers and be taught by others. Moreover they can generalize and systemize. Philips (1993, p. 5) states that tasks for young learners are mostly orally-based and manageable as well as being enjoyable. This is a transitional stage between very young learners and the five to eight graders stage. Language activities for both immature and older children should be employed according to the stages in this specific group. It may be difficult to draw a line between the two in this target group.

Five to Eight Graders

Five to eight graders can be considered the last young learners group before high school. This is the most complicated group in terms of age distribution. It includes first half of teenagers in schooling who attend more complicated courses which require developed cognitive and metacognitive skills. Their attention span is longer. They use their mother tongue effectively. They have a world view which enables them to understand older people considerably.

As for foreign language learning, they are really advantageous since they are social and ready to take part in language activities which are for the immature. All types of speaking activities can be easily conducted since they have world views and some knowledge of the world to share and discuss enthusiastically. Grammar elicitation is possible with this age group due to their higher interlanguage that permits real-like communication to a certain level. Reading texts which consider gender differences and likes and dislikes of this age group can be accompanied by a wide variety of complicated follow up activities. Vocabulary tasks should be supported with constant recycling for long term storage and retrieval. Due to the developing interlanguage and personal characteristics, brainstorming and thematic writing becomes possible and very productive. Briefly, this period is critical in terms of foreign language learning and language use due to the intensive exposure and communicative teaching techniques employed. Schooling should make the arrangements to prevent young learners from becoming false beginners at all costs.

Conclusion

The teaching of English as lingua franca to young learners is based on the methodological perspectives developed in the methods era. Nevertheless, due to the rare interest in this age group and uniformity in material development during this period caused a late evolution and recognition of TEFLYL as a sub-discipline. Today, the methodological acculturation in teaching English as an international language to young learners is a developing area of applied linguistics which is open to innovation.

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