

Teaching English to children - Chapter I

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ABSTRACT

The chapter introduces the most fundamental phenomena underlying teaching a foreign language to preschoolers. Therefore, three major components contribute to this issue. The first one deals with teaching a foreign language; the second highlights the child's developmental characteristics, mainly cognitive, physical, and motoric. And the last component is a significance of movement. These three facets are discussed throughout the chapter.

Keywords: teaching English, children; foreign language

1. TEACHING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE TO PRE-SCHOOL LEARNERS

In the previous chapters the picture of children at their kindergarten age has been described. While teaching them anything, it is very crucial to know specific features of such children's thinking and playing. This section aims at combining these qualities with a foreign language teaching.

Five to seven year olds as the young language learners are depicted by Scott and Ytreberg (1990: 1-3). For a start, they sensitize teachers about typical activities that 5-7 aged children can do. Drawing on their viewpoint, children can:

- talk about what they are doing,
- tell you about what they have done or heard,
- plan activities,
- argue for something and tell you why they think what they think,
- use logical reasoning,
- use their vivid imaginations,
- use a wide range of intonation patterns in their mother tongue,
- understand direct human interactions.

The above are only initial cues that help teachers to plan their teaching activities, however, they do not suffice. There are lots of other characteristics of the young language learner. Some major of them are outlined here, too.

Pre-school learners do not always understand the rules, despite being both aware of their existence and their willingness to obey them. Children are able to make use of language skills “*long before they are aware of them*” (Scott and Ytreberg 1990: 2). Importantly, children’s main source of understanding the world takes place by means of their senses – touch, sight, hearing, taste, and smell. As the researchers stress “*The physical world is dominant at all times*” (1990: 2). Pre-schoolers’ attention and concentration span is relatively short. When it comes to spending time on playing, young children frequently play and work on their own, but in the company of others and “*they can be very reluctant to share*” (Scott and Ytreberg 1990: 2-3).

The latter view may be bound up with the fact that kindergarten children are quite self-centred and see things only from their own perspective. However, it must be remembered that their reluctance to co-play with others may result from not understanding the rules of a game or play – “*They do not always understand what we want them to do*” (Scott and Ytreberg 1990: 3). Young children are not capable of deciding for themselves what to learn. Another crucial property is that they learn best when they are enjoying themselves, as well as when they are enthusiastic and positive about learning. The teacher achieves the better results, the more able he/she is to praise children for achievements, even small and seemingly trivial. Scott and Ytreberg underline this significance in such a manner – “*It is important to praise them if they are to keep their enthusiasm and feel successful from the beginning. If we label children failures, then they believe us*” (Scott and Ytreberg 1990: 2-3).

Another very instructive framework of guidelines for teaching a foreign language to kindergarten children is provided by Komorowska (2001: 29, 32-33). She puts an emphasis on children’s concrete thinking operations and mechanic memory. Their abstract thinking and logical memory are not enough developed yet (these qualities appear in the adolescence). For the teacher, these essentials entail a variety of points that must be taken into consideration. Among those that Komorowska enumerates, the most crucial are (own translation):

- teaching and learning have to be connected with concrete objects and situations that can be found within the child’s sight;
- teaching is focused on simple names of people, objects, phenomena;
- formal grammatical rules must not be taught, therefore, explaining of grammatical terms is useless, and even harmful;
- teaching must be organized on the basis of frequent repetition and revision of vocabulary;
- repeating different words should be attractive and stimulating, for instance, by means of songs, short poems for children, and the like;
- frequent changes of activities are indispensable;
- a wide diversity of stimuli for maintaining child’s attention is necessary, e.g. image, sound, movement, games, plays, painting, watching video;
- language-based fun and play must prevail over other forms of teaching;
- teaching should aim at physical movement, e.g. clapping, jumping;
- language activity of the child should correspond with other actions, such as painting, colouring, cutting paper, gluing, moving, and the like;
- children need varying forms for expressing themselves – theatre, drama, art, music, dance.

2. SELECTED ASPECTS OF THE CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT (EMOTIONAL, COGNITIVE, SOCIAL, PHYSICAL, MOTORIC). THE IMPORTANCE OF MOVEMENT

Starting this section, it must be known that the child's development and the social surrounding he/she experiences has a substantial impact on child's subsequent life, in all relevant respects. In other words, the first years of child's life constitute the basis for his/her further functioning, personally and socially. A particular role is attributed to the brain as a coordinator of different spheres, as demonstrated in the following quotation:

Recent research on brain development emphasizes the importance of early experiences on children's physical, psychological, cognitive, and social development. Relatively new is the discovery of a biological basis for the widely held notion that a loving, secure, stimulating environment fosters healthy development, while a chronically neglectful, physically damaging, or emotionally abusive environment can produce significant, lasting harm. The brain becomes conditioned, via neuronal connections established during the early years of supportive or negative experiences, to respond according to certain patterns (www1a).

As far as fundamental manifestations of the child's development are concerned, a couple of illustrations of how the 2-4 year-old develops are presented below. Obviously, these expressions of movement are only typical examples, and it must be known that there are many more of them. Social, emotional, cognitive or physical growth of the 2-4 year old's can be characterized by such actions:

- Social and Emotional Development (www1b):
 - loves chores and may want to help set the table for meals,
 - can play happily alone but prefers having an audience,
 - understands authority but tests it,
 - becomes increasingly sociable with other children,
 - learns to be sensitive to your feelings,
 - may show first signs of sympathy and will try to comfort you when you are sad.
- Cognitive Development (www1b):
 - improves vocabulary and sentence construction rapidly,
 - starts to grasp categories (dogs and cats are animals),
 - understands instructions but may refuse to follow them,
 - attaches special appeal to toys with switches, buttons and knobs,
 - understands the concept of similarity and difference,
 - can sort toys by size and colour,
 - remembers and tells stories,
 - asks a steady stream of 'why' questions,
- Physical Development (www1b):
 - loves to tumble and may start dancing to a musical,
 - beat and hopping around on one foot,
 - proceeds with toilet training,

- uses wrists to open jars and to turn nuts, bolts and screws,
- dresses and undresses herself without an adult's help,
- pedals and steers a tricycle,
- holds a pencil in writing position and uses it to draw recognizable figures

Fogiel (1999: 426) describes the growth changes that occur during the early childhood (preschool age). According to him, at two years, the average height and weight for a child are around 34 inches and 27 lbs, respectively. The child gradually begins to look more like an adult, taking account of body proportions. The six year old develops a waist that is small in relation to his shoulders and hips. Most preschool children lose the protruding abdomen they carried during infancy.

To focus on a motor development, Fogiel claims that the ability to walk is the child's most important achievement during the course of motor development. By the age of two, the child's grasping ability has improved. He/she has become proficient at picking up objects carrying them and carefully setting them down again. Gesell (1925 in Fogiel (ed.) 1999: 427) discusses how perceptual-motor development progresses between ages 3 and 5.

He found that perceptual and motor skills interact. As he contends, a 3 year-old can draw a circle and a straight line, whilst a 2 year-old is not able to perform these actions. At the age of four the child is capable of drawing more difficult figures (a triangle, a cross) as well as buttoning his/her clothes. By the fifth year the child can lace his shoes.

Żebrowska (1977: 419) adds that at the beginning of nursery period, the child's skeleton is immensely sensitive and pliable. Joints are characterized by great mobility, but their ligaments are weak. Muscles are also tremendously frail, muscles fibres contain a lot of water, they are flimsy and thin, unable to strong and prolonged cramps. As a consequence, the child is not resistant to much effort. Monotonous, wearisome or long-standing movement tires him/her. This may contribute to defective posture of the child, and therefore it is extremely essential to reminisce about steady motion and relaxation (Żebrowska 1977: 419).

What is more, children at this age learn to do simple jigsaw puzzles and activities which involve recognizing similarities and differences. They learn how to sort, classify, and match things, and recognize the 'odd one out'. They learn to count and to have a concept of quality, position, size, and amount. They are able to follow a story, predict what might come next, and ask questions about it. They can use their imagination to invent their own stories. This is the stage at which children often have an imaginary friend, and they sometimes find it hard to separate fantasy and reality' (Reilly 1997: 8).

People do not always realize importance of motion and its role in their personal environment. In fact, movement is one of the most important development needs for the child. On the one hand, a healthy child is characterized by indefatigable movement-based activity, although he/she tires quickly enough. On the other hand, the child is able to take a short-lasting physical effort up, soon after short relaxation. In addition to this, children at the age of nursery course are interested rather in an intensive mode of movement.

The significance of movement for development of human personality was practically proved by pedagogists living in the 19th and 20th centuries. Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) was an Austrian creator of anthroposophy and the eurythmic theory. The central conception of his idea was a rhythm, interpreted as an elementary process in human nature. In Steiner's opinion people express their personality, feelings, thoughts and other meanings by rhythm and movement.

Emil Jacques Dalcroze (1865-1950) was a Swiss author of modern musical education based on rhythmic gymnastics. A Hungarian, Rudolf von Laban (1879-1958) was a creator of modern creative gymnastic.

According to him, movement is the basis for human activity, and what is more, it activates and stimulates many of our intellectual abilities (Żebrowska 1977: 419-420).

3. PIAGET' AND VYGOTSKY'S CONSIDERATIONS REFERRING TO THE CHILD'S COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

The Piaget's theory on cognitive development is a crucial milestones in psychology and concurrently the best applicable way to explain changes taking place in children's cognitive development. For a start, it is a very reasonable idea to demonstrate the preoperational stage alongside with its two sub-stages (preconceptual and intuitive thought), as occurring in the 2-7 years of a child's life. Thus, Fogiel (1999: 451) explicates Piaget's division of the preoperational stage in the following manner:

- Preconceptual (18 months – 4 years): “first such use of representational thought and symbols, such as words for objects, classification of objects”;
- Intuitive thought (4 – 7 years): “beginning of reasoning, but thinking is fragmented, centered on parts of things, rigid, and based wholly on appearances”.

When it comes to the child's reasoning ability during the preconceptual period, it can be divided into two kinds: transductive and syncretic modes of reasoning. The former occurs “when the child bases his inferences on one particular occurrence or on a single attribute of an object”. The latter in turn reflects “the child's constantly changing criteria for classification”. During the stage of the intuitive thought, the child's ability to solve problems is based on his intuition rather than logical thinking (Fogiel 1999:452).

In Piaget's outline of the young child's development he suggests that following but not entirely displacing, the sensori-motor stage (the first two years of life) a child enters a preparatory period from two years to four years when his thought processes gradually move towards higher levels of representation. Before turning to considerations of the pre-operational stage in a child's development, it is important to emphasize that the first two years of life are crucial in determining later physical, emotional and intellectual patterns.

Most children attending pre-school groups reach a stage in which their intellectual growth results in their ability to create meaningful personal representations of themselves and their environment and to relate such representations to each other. Such relationships are a critical aspect of cognitive development.

The ability to recognize the various sensations received by sense organs and then to organize them into a framework accurately and consistently is of vital importance to learning. In addition to the organization of sensations received, an adaptation process occurs so that incoming knowledge is adapted to the child's view of the world and his view of the world is adapted to his new knowledge.

This implies that cognition is guided by perception. Children think intuitively at this stage. They have a tendency to focus attention on specific static objects within the environment. They see at the moment what is real for them and do not consider changes which may occur. Indeed, it is usual for a child's attention to focus first on the object and then

on a second object without establishing any logical connections between the two (Fogiel 1999: 452-453; Wortman and Loftus 1992: 264-265; Cameron 2001: 2-4).

Until reversibility takes place, enabling a child to record changes in the environment by referring back to previous focus points which have been internalized as mental images, then the child has a fleeting grasp of concepts. It is here that the use of language helps a child to compare things, which demands reasoning. A child who cannot use language may be discriminating between things at a perceptual level only. During the period from two to three years of age a major development in the use of words takes place as the child is able to convey increasing information about his intention and point of view.

Initially, his attempts to communicate will include many gestures and actions, but as he decodes the components of speech received from others around him, he begins to use adjectives and pronouns. By around four years, many children have established a number of the characteristics of adult speech and they will establish sets of meanings from their own experiences which will form the basis of their language.

Piaget draws a distinction between performance at a motoric level and verbal performance. Until a child has language, his manipulation of his environment is entirely physical. As was mentioned earlier, language is important in extending mental representations, although a child must have reached a certain capacity to make mental pictures before language can be developed. At four years many children have commenced to use words in a flowing way, questioning persistently, verbalizing situations frequently.

Often, different drawings provide the starting point of elaborated descriptions or anecdotes and this process gives important clues to the ability of children to verbalize their mental representations (Fogiel 1999: 452-453; Wortman and Loftus 1992: 264-265; Cameron 2001: 2-4).

Piaget was the originator of "egocentric theory" in psychology (Birch and Malim 1997: 48). According to his opinion, there are two sorts of thought: directed or intelligent thought and non directed or outside thought. The former is conscious and social in its nature and can be communicated through speech, whereas the latter is subconscious, individual and non-communicable.

He noticed that apart from the distinction between these two kinds of thinking, children often spoke to themselves deprived of bothering whether anyone else paid attention to what they were saying or not. According to this scholar the egocentric speech ought to be considered as taking up a halfway position between autistic and directed thought. Its role was to mediate in the process of development from the former to the latter, socialized speech. After discharging its role, Piaget hypothesized, egocentric speech atrophied and disappeared (Krakowian 2000: 49).

In summary to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, a child entering a pre-school group at the age of two years has reached the threshold of the second stage in a sequence of mental growth. The experiences of the first, sensori-motor stage have prepared and provided a base for the second stage. During this stage the child will develop capabilities which enable him to link actions to actions, things to things, and things to actions. He will organize his relationships with things and develop mental representations of himself and his environment in an increasingly abstract way, by action, by image and by symbol.

Another researcher, nonetheless not so widely quoted and interpreted as Piaget is Vygotsky. As Cameron (2001: 5) explicates, their viewpoints vary in terms of the importance given to language and to other people in the child's world. Vygotsky's theory is regarded as accentuating his central focus on the child as social being and related social contexts. What is

more, he paid a considerable attention to the individual and his cognitive development in the first language:

The development of the child's first language in the second year of life is held to generate a fundamental shift in cognitive development. Language provides the child with a new tool, opens up new opportunities for doing things and for organizing information through the use of words as symbols. Young children can often be heard talking to themselves and organizing themselves as they carry out tasks or play, in what is called private speech (Cameron 2001: 5).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Crucially, another distinction between Piaget's and Vygotsky's perspectives is that for the former the child is an active learner alone in a world of objects, whereas for the latter researcher the child is an active learner in a world full of other people. Those people constitute a substantial part of the child's learning environment, particularly through helping to learn, bringing objects and ideas to children's attention, talking while playing, reading stories, asking questions, and the like. Therefore, interacting with adults is a foundation for children's cognitive development, thereby facilitating the processes of learning to do things and learning to think. Drawing on Vygotsky's outlook, the child first does things in a social context and step by step he shifts from dependence on others to independence characteristic for his actions and thinking (Cameron 2001: 6-7).

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