Characteristics Of Young Learners

Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

The characteristics and skills children possess at school age are enormous and at the same time incredible. Hence, the researchers of this article have decided to describe some of these characteristics because they believe that such characteristics surely contribute positively to the success of children's foreign language education. The article emphasizes the fact that a teacher of a foreign language has to have enough knowledge about children, their characteristics and their abilities before they meet with them in the classroom. The article also illustrates how an understanding of how children learn will make teaching effective and learning successful. Understanding the child learner's behaviour and reaction towards what he/she encounters in their surrounding will certainly help language teachers in the task ahead of them. The task of teaching a foreign language to young learners requires enormous time and effort and, above all, preparation. Serious attention and intensive effort to understand the child learner's characteristics and skills will certainly lead to successful and fruitful achievement of foreign language learning and teaching alike. This article, therefore, presents different learner's characteristics, but it only focuses on two of them: Fun and play and Learning through doing. In addition, it looks at how these two characteristics are reflected in learning activities and textbooks.

1.1 Introduction

Children possess many characteristics that can be called for when needed, and when they start their formal instruction, i.e. when they come to school to learn, they are at an age that enables them to learn anything. At school age, in particular, children are already equipped with many skills, characteristics and abilities which they have already developed before initiating their education. These skills and characteristics will surely help them win the learning of the foreign language as soon as they are in contact with it.

The years children spend in school are considered the most vital years in their development. This is because school is the place where children are exposed to many events by which they experience new

life, gain new knowledge and strengthen their skills and abilities. They learn from the events. Their learning eventually leads them to gain opportunities in the life ahead of them. In other words, the time spent in school is the time of growing up for children in all aspects: mentally, physically and intellectually.

Focusing teachers' attention on some of the characteristics and skills their average young learner brings with them to school is of an intrinsic role. Teachers of a foreign language need to have full knowledge about those characteristics which can contribute directly and positively to their children foreign language education, development and success. In other words, they should know how children learn so that they know how to teach them. In this respect, Halliwell (1994) states:

> Working with young language learners in the primary classroom can be both a rewarding and a demanding experience. To make the most of the experience for both learners and teachers, we need to be very clear what it is we are trying to do. We must try to identify what learning a language in school demands from young children and what it can offer them. We should also acknowledge what the implications of those demands and needs are for the teachers (p.2).

Responding to Halliwell's enquiry (Ibid) in the quote above, precisely, to the expression " …we need to be very clear what it is we are trying to do…" is very essential and encouraging for everyone involved in young learners' education. Answering such question will require to know and understand what is needed to be done in the field of child's foreign language education. In addition, the results of the enquiry will lead to the discovery of the many characteristics, skills and abilities, the apparent and the hidden ones, which the child learner uses when in contact with whatever is there in their environment.

The knowledge gained from the above mentioned enquiry or any other investigation about children's behaviour will definitely guide language teachers to identify and understand the tactic young language learners rely on while in contact with them and with the foreign language.

Consequently and most importantly, understanding the child learner's tactics will help in determining and specifying the kind of learning materials, teaching techniques and learning activities the child learner is ready for. That is to say, knowledge about learners' characteristics will help to determine

what teaching activities suitable for children and at what age, and what kind of topics should be presented and how.

Halliwell (1994) in the quote above confirms the fact that educationalists, classroom teachers, textbook designers are all responsible for and involved in children's foreign language education. They need to be very clear of what the young learner requires in order to learn the foreign language, they have to be knowledgeable of children's characteristics, abilities and skills, and they have to be well-prepared for them and for their education before it sets off.

1.2. Children's Characteristics and Their Effect on L2 Teaching and Learning

According to Halliwell (1994), children are capable of utilizing some of their characteristics and their already acquired abilities to learn L2 (Second Language). At the age of 6, 7 and 8, children are full of energy, loaded with effective skills and ready to learn. Their characteristics and abilities enable them to learn anything, even if this thing is as new and strange to them as a foreign language.

The most precious characteristic a child possesses, particularly, when he or she is 6,7 or 8 is the energy, enthusiasm and enjoyment he/she feels when he/she is asked to do something and\ or perform an action. Most normal children not only have fun in what they are doing but also learn through it.

Children are also described as having a powerful ability of imagination and curiosity. They imagine things even if they do not exist in reality. For example, a young female child will talk to her doll as if she is her mother or sister, and a male child will drive his toy car as if he is driving a real car on a real road. Through such interaction with their real and imaginative worlds, they learn directly and indirectly, which is itself a prominent characteristic in children's learning process.

The above mentioned characteristics are only few of the many characteristics children possess. These or others are of a great effect on children foreign language success provided that they are reflected in the learning activities and teaching techniques in children foreign language textbooks and classrooms. The following sections will look into only two of these characteristics, namely, fun and play and learning through doing, and investigate how they are reflected in some learning activities and textbooks.

1.2.1. Fun and Play

One of the most essential factors in language learning is to keep the child motivated and interested in learning. This happens only by engaging the young learner in a variety of tasks and

activities through which the learner experiences the sense of fun and play. Singing songs, for example, or playing games, doing puzzles, giving guesses, or telling stories are all games but also classroom activities that are capable of entering young learners into the spirit of the event and rising the sense of fun and play in the them.

Young learners enjoy learning and singing at the same time, and find this highly enjoyable and motivating. They enjoy chants which are also songs without music but with a very marked rhythm that young learners love to say and repeat. They love to do that alone and/ or in choral. Both songs and chants can be used as tools to teach children the sound, vocabulary and structures of the foreign language. In this concern, Phillips (1993) states that "You can use songs and chants to teach children the sounds and the rhythm of English, to reinforce structures and vocabulary, or as Total Physical Response activities-but above all to have fun (p.100).

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) explain that "Rhymes are repetitive; they have natural rhythm and they have an element of fun of playing with the language. Children play with language in their mother tongue, so this is a familiar part of their learning process"(p.27). While singing, children are enjoying the song and having fun pronouncing its words. This is a great “Listen and Repeat” activity, and it is also a great chance for the young learner to interact with the foreign language sounds, intonation and meaning. Music and rhythm will help them remember the words in the song because they usually stay longer in one’s mind than words which are said or read. Philips (Ibid) emphasizes this fact saying that:

> We have all experienced songs which we just can’t get out of our heads. Music and rhythm make it much easier to imitate and remember language than word which are ‘just spoken’- if you teach children a song, it somehow ‘sticks’ (p.100).

Drama is another game of fun and play and is one way of setting the child leaner into action. The child learner acts and takes a role- play and acts as if he/she is in a real situation in which he/she tries to show their talent and skill. This is why taking role-play is a very effective classroom activity that encourages the learners to communicate with each other,thus learn from

each other. Halliwell(1994) states that "…games are so useful and so important. It is not just because they are fun; it's partly because the fun element creates a desire to communicate and partly because games can create unpredictability "(p.5).

Young learners are at their best while learning through the tangible, for instance, they love playing with toys, and making their own puppets and playing with them. They love colouring pictures which can be exploited for teaching of the colour words and names of objects. They enjoy cutting and putting things in the order they think is right for them, even when this order is not right for their teacher. To put it more simply, young learners learn from the things they see and touch because these things exist in their concrete world. In this respect, Scott and Ytreberg (1990) state that children understanding "… comes through hands, eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant all times" (p.2). Shin (2006) emphasizes the same fact by stating:

> One way to capture their attention and keep them engaged in activities is to supplement the activities with lots of brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets or objects to match the ones used in stories that you tell or songs that you sing (p.3).

Because children have an instinct for play and fun, they can easily create it when, for example, listening to a story. In addition to Shin (2006), Scott and Ytreberg (1990) emphasize the important role of story-telling. They (Ibid) say "Listening to stories allows children to form their own inner pictures. They have no problems with animals and objects which talk- they can identify with them, and the stories can help them to come to terms with their own feelings". Halliwell (1994), too, points out that "children have an enormous capacity for finding and making fun…they choose the most inconvenient moments to indulge it. They bring spark of individuality and drama to much that they do"(p.6).

Children love varieties. They find enjoyment and show interest in doing different activities in one class period. This is another characteristic that is noticeable in children's behaviour. Young learners will be very happy performing different actions in a short time. They find fun when they are asked, for example, to identify the animals through the sounds they hear for one minute or two, but no longer than this because they will get bored.; the teacher, therefore, should stop them then,

and tell them to find the animal, of which they have identified the sounds, in the pictures in front of them. This should not take a long time. After that, the teacher should ask them to colour the animals in the pictures. This also should not take the rest of the classroom time. In other words, the teacher should move from doing one activity to another to keep the learners interested and motivated. It is known that children get bored of doing the same thing for a long time, since their concentration time span is usually very short.

Children will feel attach to their teachers and classrooms and will respond wholeheartedly to the efforts done for them. They will be very happy and active the whole classroom time with a variety of activities: games, songs, stories, etc. This will create an enjoyable productive environment where the feeling of boredom and tiredness is far away distant and the sense rate of fun, interest and motivation towards learning and teaching of the foreign language becomes very high on both parties: the young learner and the teacher.

1.2. 2. Learning through Doing

By nature, children love the things they do for themselves and become motivated in them even if they knew what they did was not real. Through doing things and acting them out using the foreign language, children gain a lot of knowledge about the language and develop the sense of how it behaves. Through engagement of mind and body, children enter the spirit of the events and experience the emotions involved in them. According to Phillips(1993) "Young learners respond to language according to what it does or what they can do with it, rather than treating it as an intellectual game or abstract system"(p.7).

The activities that suite almost all children are those which provoke actions. The "Listen and DO "activity is one kind of such activities which provoke children to act. The "Listen and Do" activities are actually based on the Total Physical Response (TPR) proposed by Asher and recommended by Imssalem (2000). She (Ibid) recommends the use of Asher's TPR, particularly, in the early stages of foreign language learning. Philips (1993), too, stresses the usefulness of the technique stating that it is "…an extremely useful and adaptable teaching technique, especially in primary classes." (p. 19). The choice of the TPR technique is based on the fact that people learn best when they are physically involved. This is true about children. They usually tend to do what

they are asked to do without responding orally; however, they successed in doing it. Imssalem (2000) states:

> In Asher's techniques, the students remain silent in the early stages, but they have to perform certain actions in response to the teacher's commands in the target language. These begin with simple imperatives and go on to more complex sentences. Because the input provokes a physical response from the students, the intake is understood (p.219).

Scott and Ytrberg (1990) clarify a similar fact stating that:

> …listening is the skill that children acquire first, especially, if they have not yet learnt to read. When the pupils start to learn a foreign language, it is going in mainly through their ears and what the pupils hear is their main source of the language. Of course, we also give them as much visual back-up as possible through facial expression, through movement, through mime and through pictures" (p.21).

Generally, the language used between children and adults, whether at home, in class, or outside them is the kind of language that contains an instruction, an order or a command given by the adult and performed by the child. For example, most of the day time, a mother interacts with her child with similar language as this: "Eat your food", "Be careful, you hurt yourself", "Clean your teeth", Don't go out", "Put your pajamas on", "Take off your shoes", "Let's read a story together", and many more. This type of language provokes the child to do something or to move to perform certain actions. This can make them feel that they are important and so special to those who have involved them. Thus they tend to show willingness and readiness to perform the actions successfully and with full enjoyment. This is indeed how children learn: engaging in what they are doing, enjoying it; as a result, they learn it.

Halliwell(1994) indicates that children have a great ability to grasp the meaning of what they hear. Classroom language has a great deal of similarity to children's everyday language. In classroom, the teacher usually uses and communicates with his / her young learner in classroom language, which usually consists of phrases such as " Sit down every one, please " Come here, please "Sit in front ", " Listen and draw ", " Don't do this, please", " Let's sing / play together", " Count to ten" , " Draw a smiley face ",and many more like them. In real life, children hear similar

phrases of instruction and order every day said in their first language. This is why they can easily predict the meaning through intonation and gestures which they usually relay on to understand language. Therefore, they can activate this ability to understand the foreign language.

In addition, classroom language continuously contains new vocabulary and structures that are considered of having vital roles in developing the child language competence. Because classroom language engages the learners' mind and body, it prevents them from getting distracted. For example, while listening to the instruction, the child is using his/her mind and eyes to understand what is being told to do, and accordingly he/she performs the action. It is not only this, when given the instruction, the young learner is indirectly and effortlessly acquiring the language of the phrase he /she is asked to do, making the task of teaching it even easier for the teacher.

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) advocate using activities of "Listen and Do" because the learners are experiencing what they are doing. They (Ibid) explain"…the 'Listen and Do' activity which we can and should make use of from the moment we start the English lessons is giving genuine instructions "(p.21). They (1990) add "Most of classroom language is a type of "Listen and Do" activity." (p.21). In the beginning, the teacher starts by asking the pupils to do very simple actions using short phrases, for example, "stand up", ''sit down'' ''Listen and draw''etc., and gradually moves to use longer phrases, such as ''open your books on page 7'', ''Put your hands up if you know'', ''walk to the door and open it'', ''shake hands with your desk mate''. Philips(1993) too emphasizes the use of activities of actions that are based on TPR. She (Ibid) states:

With TPR the children listen to their teacher telling them what to do, then do it. Instruction can range from something as simple as Touch your nose to more complex sentences like Go and stand next to the girl who's wearing a red jumper, but who who is'nt wearing black shoes (p.19).

Most of all ,and the good thing about "Listen and Do" activity is that it tells the teacher at once whether the young learner has understood what is being said to them or not.

Scott and Ytreberg (1990) say that "…the more language the pupils learn, the more you can ask them to do" (p.21). The more the child learner hears and performs the instruction, the more the teacher extends the instruction, the more he/she becomes competent of the language, which is the aim of all activities and which will contribute to a fruitful language classroom.

1. 3. Samples of Teaching and Learning Activities

The followings are sample example activities taken from a text book for teaching English as a foreign language to young learners. The samples show some of the learning activities the child learner faces in their English text books and applies in their classrooms. The text book investigated is called Textbook One: English Time 1.

It is a Student's Book 1 aimed for children leaning English for the first time. It was written by Susan Rivers and Setsuko Toyama (2011). English Time is a six- level communicative course for children who are studying English for the first time and the series develops students speaking, listening, reading and writing skills through activities that appeal to their curiosity and sense of fun.

In the textbook, most of the activities are set to develop the listening skill for the child. For example, Lesson 1 consists of classroom language of instruction and order. The first activity in it is "Listen and do the action" activity. The learners listen to the teacher's instructions and do them. The instructions in this lesson are short and easy to perform by the pupils and easy to mime by the teacher, for example, " Stand up", "Sit down", " Listen", "Point" , "Quiet" " Stop". Page 2 in the same lesson introduces longer phrases of instruction, for example, "Open your book", "Take out your pencil", "Put away your pencil", and "Make a circle and colour ". These words and phrases are provided with brightly coloured pictures. The teacher in the pictures is miming the instruction required from the pupils. This is very important because it helps the learners to understand what is required from them much easier and quicker.

All the lessons in the textbook are divided into short sections: Conversation Time, Word Time, Practice Time and Phonics Time. Each lesson starts with "Listen and Repeat" activity. In addition, they have other activities such as "listen and write", "listen and circle", "listen and point" and "point and say the words". In the conversation time, for example, the learners are asked to role- play the conversation after they have listened to it. The aim of this activity is to develop the child's communicative ability. In the practice Time, the pupils have to practice the words they are learning in songs and chants so that they stay longer in their memory.

After investigating the type of activities in English Time, the researcher has found that it starts from very simple instructions and ends in short conversations. It appears that the textbook authors find it sufficient enough to adapt the TPR technique because it is not restricted only to simple instructions

and orders, it is also extended to include songs, drama, and storytelling. All of these activities proved to be suitable and enjoyable for all children who come to language class looking forward to leaning the foreign language.

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