

# How children learn languages

**Título:** How children learn languages. **Target:** Educación Primaria. **Asignatura:** Lengua Extranjera (Inglés). **Autor:** Lidia López Sanz, Maestra. Especialidad en Lengua Extranjera (Inglés), Maestra especialista en Lengua Extranjera (Inglés).

The fact that infants start naturally to acquire their mother tongue from the very earliest of ages suggests that it might be possible to take advantage of this facility to acquire two or three languages. Young children have all that is required for the acquisition of two or three languages at the same time, as happens, when the father and mother do not have the same mother tongue.

There is a great temptation to recommend that all children be given a bilingual education given the fact that families who are not adequately informed on the subject often assume that this is the purpose of language teaching in schools. Bilingualism is not an objective for schools to aim for, considering the limitations on time, the number of pupils, and the conflicting claims of other subjects.

Bilingualism is the result of family circumstances or of other natural form of contact with different languages, such as extended periods of residence in countries where other languages are spoken, or the coexistence of a national language with a regional language.

## LEARNING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT SCHOOL

The most common teaching situation at the moment is one inside a classroom, where the teacher is face to face with the pupils, in groups of various sizes, for a few hours to face with the pupils, in groups of various sizes, for a few hours of lessons each week. Such situations are not the most suitable for learning a new linguistic code and putting it into practice in exchanges which are related to real communicative needs.

One of the most important lessons which can be drawn from the period of mother tongue acquisition is that it is clearly a pleasurable process because it satisfies, in a very short time, a child's basic need to communicate interactively with the people and environment. This poses a problem when learning a foreign language, as the basic need to communicate is already satisfied through the competence acquired in the mother tongue, and the environment has mostly been discovered and explored through the ability to manipulate. Another problem about acquisition is that it takes a long time. In fact, time is a crucial issue. The vast majority of students in the world study language for about two and a half hours per week, which is not much time when compared to the time taken by children to acquire their first languages. A key question for us must be whether we use our time well- it is almost certainly the case that the conscious learning of certain items does speed the process up, even if its main function is to raise the students's grammatical awareness. Not only that but many of our students want and expect this type of learning. We must also look at the conditions under which language learning takes place and who the students are.

The most important concern of foreign language teachers is the creation of as many ways as possible of giving their pupils an appetite to learn. The effort which the pupils put into participating must be rewarded by the teacher.

It is essential to ensure that the interest which pupils take in the teaching they receive it is related to their own interests. Listed below are the main elements of the pupils' interest, the common feature of which is, in fact, action.

1. A natural desire to communicate, still present after mother tongue acquisition.
2. Pleasure taken in playing with a new code.
3. Pleasure derived from learning and understanding.
4. Pleasure derived from discovering, right from the first lessons, aspects of other culture contained a new language.

Teaching methods are constantly involving, to the extent that, very little is known with certainty about the best way to go about teaching.

It is the teacher's responsibility to monitor constantly the behaviour of the pupils in order to discover which ways of proceeding appear most likely to result in learning.

A foreign language cannot be learned simply through imitation and mechanical repetition. Like acquisition, however, learning does not include phases of imitation and repetition. Like acquisition, however, learning does not include phases of imitation and repetition. Neither can a foreign language be learnt by the sole expedient of learning how it is put together and how it functions, but phases of reflection by the pupils on this or that linguistic point are certainly helpful when placed between more practical phases. Communication using language consists of alternating between listening and expressing. Insisting on the pupils speaking all the time, may be seriously mistaken in insufficient attention has been paid to whether there is proper comprehension or not.

Many of the skills that we have in our own native language are directly transferable to a foreign language. The aim of all our teaching is to train students to communicative efficiency. The importance of stages where there is an emphasis on tasks and the students' own personalities and responsibility for their own learning has to go together with more formal language work and that is where the status of a communicative approach is called into question. Language teaching must be designed to teach students to communicate, however the language is organised.

A balanced activities approach sees the job of the teacher as that of ensuring that students get a variety of activities which foster acquisition and which foster learning. The programme will be planned on the basis of achieving a balance between the different categories of input and output where communicative activities will predominate over controlled language presentation.

By presenting the students with a variety of activities we can ensure their continuing interest and involvement in the language programme. Classes which continually have the same activities are not likely to sustain interest, particularly where the students have no motivation. A programme that presents a variety of activities is far more likely to continually engage the students' interest.

The teacher should be flexible and adaptable in order to adapt the programme on the basis of the different groups that are being taught. Flexibility is necessary in order to be sensitive to the changing needs of the group as the lesson progresses. In simple terms it means that decisions taken before the lesson about what is going to happen are not in some way sacred. Good teachers must be prepared to adapt and alter their plans if this proves necessary.

The teacher must find a balance between the components we wish to include in order to keep the students' interests in the learning process as being the necessary factor in language teaching. The use of tasks and the provision of a lot of comprehensible input will help our students in a lot of ways. If the students make the most of their own resources and if they can take their own decisions about what to do next and how best to study, their language is better and they achieve more. We must encourage students to take charge of their own learning. We cannot teach students everything.

The use of tasks and the provision of a lot of comprehensible input will help our students in a lot of ways. Students will activate their knowledge and they will internalise the language. Conscious learning is seen as only one part of the methodological approach which also encourages language acquisition through the use of language in communicative tasks and activities. ●

### References

- BREWSTER J., ELLIS G. y GIRARD D. (1992). *The Primary English Teacher's Guide*. Harmondsworth. Penguin English.
- SCRIVENER, Jim. (1994). *Learning Teaching*. Oxford. Heinemann.