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Secondary ELT: issues and trends

Annamaria Pinter

Introduction

Adolescents/teenagers are considered by many a difficult group to teach. Stereotypically, they are excitable, moody, exuberant and impulsive; they are obsessed with whether their appearance looks ‘cool’ to others; they question everything; and they are in a continuous search for their ‘true self,’ which often involves getting into conflicts with parents, teachers and other figures of authority. Teenage identity-seeking translates into experimenting with a wide range of expressive styles in music, clothing and other modes of self-expression (Legutke, 2012), recognised widely as ‘youth culture’ (Diller et al., 2000; Blossfeld et al., 2006). Teenagers can bring a great deal of their creativity, energy and enthusiasm into the classroom but, at the same time, their turbulent lives and their constant questioning of the status quo can also be a source of challenge and even frustration for those working with them.

Adolescence or the teenage years fall between childhood and adulthood, and their boundaries are marked by the biological changes occurring in puberty on the one side and the transition to adult status on the other side. The Society for Research on Adolescence (SRA), according to Goossens (2006), divides adolescence into three distinct stages: early adolescence (between the ages of 10-15), mid-adolescence (between the ages of 15-18) and finally late adolescence (between the ages of 18-22 years old). In most parts of the developed world, the period of adolescence is lengthening because of the earlier onset of puberty as well as the need to stay dependent longer on parents, sometime up to ages well beyond 22. Most teenagers between the ages of 10-16/18 are in secondary education; thus, although there is a great deal of variation across different contexts with regard to the exact age secondary education begins and ends, in most countries this period covers early and mid-adolescence.

Secondary level learners make up by far the largest group of all English learners worldwide and they learn in a variety of contexts, ranging from classrooms where the latest technology such as fast internet connections and other learning resources are readily available, to difficult,

rural contexts where a school may have a single computer only with intermittent internet access, no books and scarce learning resources (see Shamim and Kuchah's discussion of teaching large classes in 'difficult circumstances', this volume). Overall, L2 English learning has had a much longer tradition in the secondary sector in contrast to primary English learning, which has only recently spread to state elementary school curricula across the world (see Enever, this volume).

In this chapter, my aim is to identify some core characteristics of teenage learners as thinkers and language learners related to general theories of physical and cognitive development, as well as SLA research and specific studies in different L2 contexts. The chapter will also consider the opportunities and challenges in the current global context due to English being the dominant lingua franca worldwide and due to the technological advances available to current generations of teenage learners worldwide.

Background: characteristics of teenagers

Physical and cognitive development

According to Lightfoot et al. (2013), following babyhood physical growth is fastest in the teenage years. Boys may grow as much as 23 centimetres in height and girls 15-18 centimetres. Adolescents experience emotional highs and lows and a general emotional intensity due to hormone development. They are prone to sensation seeking and have a desire to participate in highly arousing activities (Martin et al., 2002). Neuroscientists suggest that this behavioural transition toward novelty-seeking and adventurousness is associated with the physical changes in the body such as the development of the limbic system. Adolescence is a turbulent time overall, although, over the course of adolescence, emotions become gradually less intense with ups and downs becoming less frequent, and by the end of the teenage years most teenagers become more effective and better at controlling their emotions (Steinberg, 2005). Compared to younger children, Larson et al. (2002) report that the average level of happiness declines in adolescence for both genders although girls seem to have slightly more positive emotions than boys. It is only in late adolescence or early adulthood that the cortex and executive functions of the brain mature, increasing the individual's ability to control the way s/he thinks, feels, and acts in particular situations (e.g. Steinberg, 2010).

Major changes occur in brain development during the adolescent years, which means that teenagers are able to learn faster and more efficiently than younger children. For example, the speed of retrieving information from long-term memory improves steadily in adolescence (Slater and Bremner, 2011). In addition to increasing memory capacity, teenagers also develop ever more effective learning strategies to help both memory and meta-memory, i.e. their awareness of memory functions. Adolescent strategy use is more flexible, broader in scope, and it is in aid of a wider range of tasks as compared with younger children.

Teenagers fall within the Piagetian 'formal operation' period (beyond the age of 12). Piaget's developmental model is one of the most well-known models of child development and it suggests that human development unfolds in stages, which are universally predictable. These stages include the '*sensory-motor stage*' from 0-2 years of age, the '*pre-operational stage*' from 2-7 years of age, '*the concrete operational stage*' from 7-12 years of the age, and finally the '*formal operational stage*' beyond the age of 12. All children progress steadily through these stages and they become more logical, and more able to de-centre and to think in a systematic fashion. The qualitative change that separates teenagers from the previous stage is their ability to think logically even when they are presented with abstract problems. The concrete operational child is already able to understanding analogies when these are limited to very familiar content, while teenagers, who are formal operational thinkers, have a much more flexible, abstract understanding (Slater and Bremner, 2011).

Piaget described the core formal operational ability as 'hypothetical-deductive reasoning', which means being able to judge a problem or argument on the basis of its logical properties alone. When teenagers are presented with the well-known 'balance scale problem' and they are asked about what factors influence the movement of the scales, learners at this stage of development are able to ascertain that both variables are important (i.e. the weight on each arm or the distance of each arm from the fulcrum) by thinking systematically about multiple dimensions of the problem and by considering the interaction between both weight and distance. In contrast, younger, concrete operational children tend to try different combinations of weights and distances randomly, in an unsystematic manner. It seems that only learners above the age of 12 are able to offer multiple hypotheses, isolate factors one by one, test the impact of each factor systematically while keeping other factors constant, and then proceed to test the effect of two factor combinations.

These cognitive achievements, combined with a questioning attitude and a general openness to the world, make teenagers potentially very powerful thinkers. In terms of language teaching, this means that teachers can certainly experiment with abstract problems and tasks, complicated games or puzzles, or debates about controversial issues. Due to their advanced thinking skills, vast memory capacity and an ability to look at problems from various angles, learners will enjoy working with more challenging and unusual tasks.

Critics maintain that, overall, Piaget's claims about adolescence were too ambitious. Cultural differences and schooling play important roles as to whether individuals reach the formal operational stage at all. In addition, studies have also identified development that takes place post-adolescence, e.g. in terms of reasoning and decision-making (e.g. Halpern-Felsher and Cauffman 2001), so that the formal operational period is not the end of the road when it comes to development.

Thus, in contrast to Piaget's developmental theory based on universal stages, Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural approach to development puts the emphasis on the continuous process of development which unfolds through careful scaffolding and focuses on the mediating role of adults, experts and more knowledgeable peers. From this perspective, any learning is social in origin and therefore the use of talk as a mediating tool between experts and novices is central in helping learners' understanding and growth.

Younger children, especially those under the age of 9-10 are less efficient communicators, i.e. they might find talking to people they do not know difficult, might not appreciate the needs of listeners in conversations, or might not be able to verbalise their thoughts and ideas very succinctly. They may not be able to acknowledge lack of understanding or take a few steps back and reflect on one's learning or ideas. However, by the age of 12 these skills grow exponentially. Since teenage learners have the ability to use language powerfully to question ideas, to clarify their own and other's thoughts and reflect on ideas and problems, they become skilled at managing peer collaboration and participation in collaborative dialogue.

In terms of classroom learning, therefore, peer interaction between teenage learners has been the focus of many studies. In Swain and Lapkin's study (2002), for example, two 12 year old girls were working on writing a story together and when they were invited to reflect on the reformulations a tutor made to their writing, they were able to talk through the text, get a deeper

understanding of the grammatical structures and learn new language as a result of co-constructing their joint understanding. In collaborative dialogue, learners verbalise their own thoughts, question and reflect on these verbalisations, and pull their knowledge and ideas together. In another study by Tsui and Ng (2000) in a Hong Kong secondary school with grade 12 students, it was found that teenage learners were able to benefit from peer feedback specifically focussed on grammar, even though they considered teacher feedback more authoritative. In particular, researchers have been interested in the quality of their peer interaction when they were focussing on grammatical difficulties. This type of ‘languaging’ according to Swain (2006) refers to a form of verbalisation which mediates cognitively demanding activity. In a further study by Suzuki and Itagaki (2009), it was found that even low-intermediate level Japanese secondary school students were able to learn from their peers while engaged in different types of languaging depending on the task. The authors suggest that teachers should encourage such languaging in their classes, and, in particular, translation tasks in monolingual classes might be useful for this kind of collaborative language work.

For English language teachers, there are clear implications with regard to encouraging collaborative learning. For example, learners might be asked to write stories together or work on projects where different members of the group will take on different roles. With regard to the role of language, activities that require reflection, for example, through self-assessment and peer-assessment or through using the metacognitive cycle of planning, monitoring and evaluating learning will also be suitable. Due to their ability to stand back and reflect on their learning, teenage learners also enjoy strategy training, whereas younger children tend not to be able to carry over any strategy training gains to new tasks.

Social development and identity growth

While younger children think about themselves mainly in terms of observable characteristics, adolescents are able to reflect on their own thoughts, desires and motives more readily (Slater and Bremner, 2011). One challenge is to identify how one is unique as an individual and how still one is similar to others; maintaining individuality while still fitting into a group is an important task all teenagers need to tackle. This requires a great deal of experimenting with different possible identities. For example, it may be that a teenage boy is interested in music or dancing but he decides to keep these interests to himself because of the suspicion that his peer group might consider these unusual and/or feminine. How much of yourself you decide to

reveal to others is a careful process of experimentation that takes time and confidence to manage.

By the time teenagers are in secondary schools they spend twice as much time with their peers and friends as they do with their parents and other adults (Lightfoot et al., 2013). There are two kinds of peer relationships in the teenage years: those with close friends and those with a wider network of acquaintances. Adolescent friendships are sophisticated, based on reciprocity, emotional sharing, interests, commitment, loyalty and equality. However, there are important differences between the qualities of friendships of girls and boys. Boys are generally less intimate and less trusting, and tend to avoid talking about emotionally charged experiences. They are also often more competitive than girls and engage in competitive play activities more readily when together. Hendry and Kloep (2006: 252) suggest that young people typically spend a great deal of their leisure time either with their best friend, or a group of friends or both, often 'not doing anything' but chatting, giggling and just hanging around. Fooling around and laughter may seem rather aimless and pointless to an outsider, yet these are perceived as among the most fulfilling of activities by adolescents themselves (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson, 1984). When friends cannot meet face-to-face, in many contexts, mobile phones and computers become important devices to enable the chatting to continue.

Recently, scholars have been emphasising the importance of identity development and its links with autonomy and motivation in adolescence (e.g. Ushioda, 2013). Teenagers' natural inclination to explore their identities can be meaningful through using a second language. English as a 'lingua franca', a language that is universally understood, can be motivating for teenagers to learn especially if they are encouraged to develop and reflect on their 'ideal self' (Dörnyei, 2009; Lamb, this volume) as competent English speakers participating successfully in the global online community. Arnett (2002: 777) argues that some youths develop bicultural identity, with one part of their identity rooted in their own local culture and another part 'stemming from an awareness of their relation to the global world' through English.

Lamb and Budiyanto (2013) point out that for many L2 English speaking teenagers, identity development as a process coincides with a phase in their lives when their childhood identities are broken down and their new developing sense of self is in a flux. In their study in provincial Indonesia, they interviewed 12-14 year olds about their English learning experiences. The data suggests that successful interactions with native speakers are motivating for Indonesian

teenagers because these interactions allow space for identity work. In these authentic interactions with native speakers, the learners can see themselves and their own local cultures through a different lens, i.e. the eyes of the outsider.

Many teenagers lead busy and rich social lives with hobbies, getting together with their friends regularly to play computer games, or sports and other activities. In general, compared to younger children, a wider range of out of school experiences are available to most teenagers. Henry (2013), writing about Swedish teenage learners, of English argues that digital game playing in particular in English is an important past time activity for this age group (we shall return to online gaming towards the end of this chapter). He also comments that there is a serious discrepancy between ‘out of school English’ and ‘school English’ in that the intensity of interaction that takes place during games cannot be replicated in the classroom. This paper suggests that it is important for teachers to ‘make connections’ between classroom English and outside classroom English. Such connections can be made, for example, by inviting students to do short presentations about the rules of some games, and also by encouraging them to reflect on what language it is they need in these games and where their current language gaps might be.

Teenage language learners and SLA

Having considered the physical, cognitive and social development of the teenage years and some of their implications for teachers, this next section gives a brief overview of teenage learners from a psycholinguistic angle.

Within SLA research, studies that have focussed on the ‘age factor’ in second language acquisition have contrasted young children (those who started a second/foreign language after puberty, generally meaning after 12 years of age) and older learners to try to tease out the exact effects of age based on the Critical Period Hypothesis originally suggested by Lenneberg (1967) (see also Enever, this volume). While there is no space here to discuss this literature in full, it is important to acknowledge that, overall, this body of literature suggests that teenage learners are in fact faster and more efficient language learners than younger children. This comes as something of a surprise when contrasted with anecdotal observations based on stories of immigrant families, where adults typically do not progress beyond a particular level of L2 while children tend to become native-like - younger children do have some limited advantages

in naturalistic contexts such as acquiring implicit grammatical rules or native-like pronunciation in the early years (DeKeyser, 2012). However, in most English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, i.e. in formal classrooms where children are learning English as a school subject, the notion of the critical period does not carry much meaning because the learning environment is far from naturalistic and it often lacks good quality input, opportunities to interact with a variety of competent speakers and a strong need/motivation to fit in a new context. Muñoz (2008) summarises the characteristics of classroom learning contexts as offering limited instructional time, limited exposure to L2 in terms of both quantity and quality, and most importantly perhaps, the target language is not used by peers or outside the classroom.

In such formal classroom contexts, when comparisons are made between young and older learners, studies indicate that younger learners cannot capitalise on their ‘critical period’ whilst older learners (such as teenagers) can rely on more efficient learning strategies, larger memory stores and can focus on the learning task with sustained intensity. All these qualities make them faster and more efficient language learners. Based on a very large data source, Muñoz (2006), for example, reports that teenage learners in Spanish schools progress faster than younger learners in learning English (L2) and even after longer periods of time, younger learners do not outperform those who only started in their teenage years, except perhaps in pronunciation (Muñoz, 2008).

The implications for teachers and classroom practice from this research are in line with what has been suggested earlier. Even if learners start a second/foreign language at the age of 12 or later, they will be able to progress quickly, tackle complex tasks and work collaboratively, and they are unlikely to come short in terms of their progress/ proficiency when compared to those who started the L2 in formal classroom contexts earlier/ at a younger age in childhood.

Learning English in the connected, globalised world

The spread of English and secondary ELT

Because of the unprecedented spread of English as a global lingua franca, the number of English learners is growing steadily all over the world (see Seargeant, this volume). In Europe, for example, almost all countries have introduced English into the primary curriculum, so in

theory learners enter secondary education with some ‘basic’ English skills to build on, and in some contexts they add another foreign language to the curriculum at the age of 14-15.

Despite the fact that in most contexts English is now taught at primary level, in very few contexts has the difficulty of transition from primary to secondary been solved. In many contexts, children who progress from primary to secondary school with some English knowledge will still have to start all over again because of lack of communication and planning between primary and secondary institutions (see also Enever, this volume). There is also a competing private sector which offers additional classes to those who can afford it on top of their standard school English education. As a result, teenage classes are often heterogeneous with learners of various proficiency levels. Due to global travel and mobility, teenage classes are also more multilingual and multicultural than ever before, and the challenges for teachers of all subjects in these classes are therefore formidable. Large heterogeneous classes naturally call for differentiation, group work, project work and other approaches to teaching and learning that take into account learner differences and build on learners’ individual strengths and needs and interests. Reflecting these realities, teenage EFL materials tend to promote learner training, autonomous ways of working and systematic reflection on one’s progress (for further discussion of learner autonomy, see Benson, this volume).

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) has also recently become very popular both in Europe and beyond (e.g. Llinares et al., 2012; Morton, this volume). CLIL presents great challenges in terms of developing suitable materials in local contexts but the success of these programmes is undeniable, with learners achieving much higher levels of proficiency and good quality content knowledge as compared to their mainstream EFL counterparts. Banegas (2013) argues that when selecting materials for content, learners should be consulted. They then become more motivated because they have the opportunity to work with authentic materials that are naturally engaging and responsive to their local context and needs. They can engage in meaningful language use and learn/ explore something new about the world through English as a second language.

With the spread of English, standardised testing has also spread across most contexts. In some contexts learners need to pass English exams to gain entrance to good universities, and many are encouraged to pass national and/or international tests such as the PELT (Practical English level tests for Elementary English), or Cambridge Proficiency exams, or the International

English Language Test (IELTS) to prepare them for study in an English speaking country. International tests are popular and parents pay large sums of money for certificates. In many countries, large-scale testing starts at an early age (elementary level) and one unfortunate effect of this is that it leads to students being driven solely by narrowly instrumental motives. Parents are committed to sending their children to attend private classes to enhance their chances in the job market but this is usually the privilege of the well-to-do. As a consequence, the gap is widening in most contexts between those who become competent speakers due to their favourable socio-economic background and those who cannot afford extra provision, fees for tests or trips or to study abroad.

Intercultural encounters and the internet

Due to technological advances, many teenagers have real and authentic opportunities to communicate with their peers across the globe via *Skype*, *Facebook*, or *Twitter*. For example, teenage friends often stay in touch by *Facebook* after moving to a new country, and families staying temporarily abroad can maintain wider family relationships or friendships by using *Skype* or *Facetime*. Within the European Union, through programmes such as *Comenius* or *E-twinning*, teachers and learners have opportunities to link up with classrooms in other parts of the world. These are exciting developments that the current generation of teachers are the first to take advantage of.

Stanley (2013), for example, describes how an Egyptian teacher working with a lower secondary with another teacher in Argentina. The students in Egypt, who were learning about rainforests, interviewed some learners and their teacher about the topic in Argentina by *Skype*. Afterwards the Egyptian teenagers completed a writing task based on the information they had learnt. Student feedback was overwhelmingly positive and following the *Skype* sessions, a *Facebook* group was set up to continue the interaction between the Egyptian and the Argentinian teenagers.

The learners joined the group voluntarily asking each other questions about a range of topics, and sharing information about their own lifestyle, culture, traditions, festivals, and some linguistic points, idioms and expressions (Stanley 2013: 50).

This genuine communication was motivating for all, and, in this example, the Egyptian teacher carried on using Skype ‘to invite guests’ into her classroom. She also made recordings of these interviews, which she could re-use with other learners and thus provided motivating, authentic tasks for them. (For further discussion of computer-mediated communication and language learning, see Kern, Ware and Warschauer, this volume).

The Internet plays a major role in many teenagers’ lives beyond the classroom. According to Palfrey and Grasser (2008) adolescents are ‘digital natives’. At least in many part of the world, Internet content creation by teenagers continues to grow. Over 70 per cent of teenage internet users create and post material regularly on social networking websites (Lenhart et al., 2011). A great deal of internet use is devoted to keeping in touch with friends or just hanging out (Boyd, 2007). Online sites such as *Facebook* offer opportunities for self-expression by constructing a ‘self -image’ while exploring one’s relationships with others. As Lightfoot et al. (2013: 577) comment:

Indeed even the size and shifting content of one’s online friends can be both used and interpreted as signs of social status and general coolness.

Teenagers are also actively shaping the Internet as well as are being shaped by it. One example to illustrate this dual process is the phenomenon of young *YouTubers* (e.g. Deyes, 2014). Without the mass viewing by mainly teenage audiences, these upcoming *YouTube* teenage celebrities would not be able to gain and maintain popularity. Their *YouTube* content is continuously shaped by viewers’ feedback but at the same time they are shaping the lives and the habits of millions of teenagers. This digital culture is relatively new, and for many, it is beginning to replace books and face-to-face interactions outside school. How this new way of functioning and spending time will affect the ‘process of coming of age for adolescents’ struggling for autonomy and identity is not yet clear (Slater and Bremner, 2011: 561). Future research will be important in this respect.

L2 learning and the internet

Teenage internet and computer mediated technology use has been explored in relation to L2 language learning. Macaro, Handley and Walter (2012) reviewed evidence regarding linguistic benefits of using CALL (computer assisted language learning) in secondary classrooms and

concluded that there is certainly plenty of evidence for linguistic development. CALL can help secondary learners with listening and writing, and even speaking can be improved. Non-linguistic benefits also occur such as positive attitudes and heightened motivation. CALL is also attractive because it helps teenage learners connect with their genuine interests. Since learning content needs to be relevant and motivating, materials for teenagers place a great deal of emphasis on pop culture, cultural issues in general and study skills, and focus on authenticity and the living language through the use of slang (Varanoglulari et al., 2008). Legutke (2012) also argues that in materials for teenagers we need frequent opportunities for creative expression, experimentation and personalisation, and teenagers should be exposed to poetic texts, music, teenage fiction and young adult literature (Bushman and Parks, 2006).

Since technology and computer mediated learning opportunities are readily available in a growing number of contexts, teachers can experiment with using *Wikis* as described, for example, in a paper by Lund and Rasmussen (2008). In this paper, Norwegian high school students worked with an open-ended, collectively oriented task (a Wiki), which asked them collectively to build a typical British town. Small groups of learners appropriated the task and reported benefiting from the collaborative process; however challenges such as not using all the intended features of the Wiki were also mentioned. Another example of exploiting computer based technologies for language learning is reported by Comas-Quinn et al. (2009). In this study, learners were encouraged to try blogging for the purpose of language learning and appreciating culture. While on a study abroad trip, the students were invited to use their own mobile phones, digital cameras and MP3 recorders to select samples of authentic language to upload to a shared website. These recordings may have taken place in restaurants, on buses, inside tourist sites or shops. As a next step, students were encouraged to comment on and discuss aspects of the language or culture represented in these recordings. This approach hands over control to the learners in that they can decide what to upload and share. This makes students alert to both linguistic and cultural content while they are immersed in it, and they can constantly evaluate their linguistic experiences in ways that would not be possible within the teacher's tight control. Mobile technologies when used for language learning purposes support the principles of Vygotskian social constructivism as learners create the learning materials collaboratively, using language as a mediating tool while commenting on or asking about each other's postings. Mobile learning technologies also promote the principles of learner-centeredness, and informal learning. Despite all these attractive features though, the

authors admit that assessing such highly individualised and organic learning is challenging, and learning outcomes will differ from student to student.

Meanwhile, in ESL contexts, immigrant youth have exploited the internet to develop hybrid identities through interacting with a range of different interlocutors online. Their positive experiences online are often in sharp contrast with their experiences as less successful language learners in their ESL classrooms, and thus serve to boost their confidence in using the second language. For example, Lam's study (2000) of a Chinese immigrant teenager in America illustrates how a marginalised youth, who is struggling with English in his institutionalized classes, can have a transformative experience by engaging in L2 English writing on the internet. Almon (the Chinese student in Lam's study) designed a home page in *GeoCities* about a young Japanese pop idol. His homepage attracted attention from a variety of online chat-mates from Canada, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia and the United States. This website afforded him regular contact and opportunities for asynchronous chats with a variety of interlocutors. He enjoyed interacting with his online friends and was aware of the fact that in writing he could express himself in English more easily compared to the difficulties he was having trying to talk in his English classes. The frequent practice led to a gradual increase in his fluency levels. 'Almon was learning not only more English but also more relevant and appropriate English for the World Wide Web community he sought to become part of' (Lam 2000: 476).

Another example is related to L2 learners' 'fan communities' (Black, 2006; 2008). Black describes some students who used their L2 English to compose and publicly post fictional narratives on *fanfiction.net*. *Fanfiction* writers typically rework an original text by integrating new materials, and extending it in different directions, such as adding new chapters and volumes to the Harry Potter books. These sites promote informal participatory types of learning because writers get regular feedback through reader reviews. Black (2008) describes a student, Nanako, who successfully improved her English through participating in a fanfiction site. Over the time she was engaging with the fanfiction site, she improved her writing as she responded to the audience's feedback, and revised and then reposted her writing, which incorporated some of her readers' suggestions and ideas. Teachers might encourage learners to share experiences about sites where such authentic English language use and learning occurs

Online games and incidental learning

Thorne et al. (2009: 808) suggest that ‘social virtualities and massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) arguably comprise the most socially and cognitively complex forms of interactive media currently available’, and there are many teenagers who play these games through English because the players are international and English is the accepted lingua franca of this context. In MMO games, thousands of people can simultaneously interact. The goal-oriented activities that become increasingly difficult as gamers gain experience offer opportunities for continual intellectual challenge. Some students’ motives for foreign language learning may be related to their desire to participate in digitally mediated communities. For example, Chik’s (2011) study with Chinese speaking gamers in Hong Kong shows that learners use electronic dictionaries to make sense of the game in English and also enjoy frequent authentic opportunities to chat with international gamers and thus pick up new English phrases. Gamers participating in the study said that the repetition of language items that reoccurs during play helps with their practice and language learning. They also suggested that learning English through gaming can be for some a deliberate endeavour. In fact, most of them played a mixture of educational and authentic games and made use of online discussion forums and online gaming platforms to extend their practice. What seems to make this learning so successful is that winning and getting further in the game is the priority, and language learning is only a secondary aim. This is related to purposeful learning, as, for example, in task-based learning where learners always have a motivating non-linguistic outcome to drive them forward (see Van den Branden, this volume). If played regularly, the game context guarantees exposure to English as well as frequent opportunities for output (Swain, 2000).

The implications for language teachers are many. For example, in classes of teenagers where such games are played regularly by most of the students, teachers may organise debates or quizzes around games or get the students to evaluate a range of games advertised on the market. They may want to write a piece of persuasive text to get others interested in new games. Some teenagers might also like to design their own games and describe them/ sell them to others. Teachers can invite learners to put themselves in the shoes of different characters in games and write/talk about contentious issues presented from their point of view. For young people whose personalities, views and ideas are in a flux, tasks where they play another character may be a safe way to experiment expressing uncertain views.

Teenage research participants in ELT research

Overall, research reported in mainstream applied linguistics journals does not necessarily differentiate between studies with teenage or adult participants. This is because, as research participants, adolescents are supposed to be very similar to adults, unlike young children where all kinds of accommodations may be appropriate when conducting research because children cannot write or cannot reflect on their learning very well, at least not when tools designed for research with adults are used.

Teenagers' status is ambiguous when it comes to consenting to participate in research. On the one hand teenagers are still protected (in the UK) by The Children's Act (1989) which covers all young people under the age of 18. In this sense, they are treated the same way as younger children even though they are clearly more able to take decisions for themselves and act autonomously about a range of issues in their lives. On the other hand, good ethical practice dictates, as France (2004: 184) argues, that young people's views and opinions are fully taken into account so it is necessary to go beyond parent/guardian consent.

Good practice should include a continual review of consent to ensure that young people remain happy with their involvement. The right to withdrawal has to be emphasised regardless of how uneasy we might feel about losing our cohort.

Each group of learners in any context will present some ethical and methodological dilemmas for researchers, and some of the dilemmas we face with younger learners may apply to teenagers as well (e.g. Pinter, 2014). For example, in secondary schools the normal power gap between teachers and students naturally contributes to the real or perceived pressure to participate and do or say the 'right thing' in research studies. In teenage classrooms, just like with younger children, it may be difficult for an individual to withdraw consent when the rest of the class are all participating in a study. In fact the effect of peer pressure may be greater than in the case of younger children.

An exciting type of research with teenagers that is lacking in ESL/ELT at present is where teenagers are enabled to participate actively to contribute to the actual research process in various ways, such as by identifying priorities for research, or by helping with data collection, analysis and dissemination. Because of their general openness to new ideas, and their interest

in materials and approaches that bring authenticity into the classrooms, it may be feasible for them to work alongside adults as co-researchers. (Fraser et al 2003)

Conclusion

Overall, teaching English to teenage learners is a challenging task. The work reviewed in this paper suggests that it is important for teachers to foster a positive classroom culture and build good connections between the teaching materials and the students' lives, use peer interaction and peer collaboration, and teach explicit learning strategies to help teenagers to gain control over their own learning. Getting students to work in groups where they can collaborate with each other, engage in joint problem-solving and prepare short presentations, quizzes or other materials for the rest of the class generally accommodates their physical, cognitive and social stage of development. In this way, gradually, teachers are able to pass control over to their students and let them take charge of their own learning through more flexible, learner-centred tasks. Teachers also need to invest time into getting to know the students, establishing communities of peers working together. Since teenagers have a growing ability to take decisions for themselves, teachers might want to involve students in selecting materials and developing rules and expectations in the classroom and for learning, rather than just impose those on them.

Discussion questions

- What motivates teenagers to learn English in your context, both generally, and in class
- What 'in class' and 'out of class' English do your students have access to, and how do they engage with it?
- What online activities are most typical for teenagers in your context? How can the use of technology be incorporated into your own teaching?
- What are the challenges of teaching adolescents in your particular context?

Related topics

Computer-mediated communication and language learning; Content and language integrated learning; Motivation; Learner autonomy; Primary ELT: issues and trends

Further Reading:

Legutke, M. L. (2012) 'Teaching Teenagers', in A. Burns and J C Richards (eds.) *The Cambridge Guide to Pedagogy and Practice in Second Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 112-119. (A concise overview of the topic, from a language teacher's point of view. It draws on current theory, research and practice in order to address key questions teachers in teenage classrooms may face, including teenagers' needs and how to accommodate these with appropriate topics, tasks and texts.)

Motteram, G. (ed.) (2013) *Innovations in Learning Technologies for English Language Teaching* London: British Council. (Freely available online from the British Council, this volume contains 7 chapters covering a range of issues related to English language teaching and CALL, including primary, secondary, adult contexts and assessment. The second chapter by Stanley is devoted to successful practices described in case studies by teachers working in the secondary sector. Each chapter offers valuable practical ideas to practising English teachers.)

Palfrey J and U Grasser (2008) *Born digital: understanding the first generation of digital natives* New York: Basic Books. (This interesting text focuses on Internet users born after the 1980s, termed 'digital natives'. The authors discuss the opportunities and challenges associated with the Internet as a social space, discussing issues surrounding young people's privacy and vulnerability as Internet users, and Internet regulation both in Europe and the USA.)

Slater, A. and J G Bremner (2011) *An Introduction to Developmental Psychology* Wiley. (This is a state-of-the-art, comprehensive and authoritative overview of child development from birth to adolescence. It is thematically organised and discusses theories, empirical research and key debates in an international context. It has an excellent overview of the teenage years.)

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