# The role of interaction in the young learners' classroom

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**Abstract**

Due to the early start of EFL nowadays in many schools, there is a necessity of knowing more about the language learning process and about age-appropriate methodologies. This paper reports on the teaching techniques and the learning strategies observed in the young learners' classrooms and focuses on evidence-based practices. Findings show that children internalize English through conversational interactions with the teachers while carrying out activities designed to improve the four skills.

**Key words**: second language, young learners, teaching methodologies, learning process, conversational interaction.

**Resumen**

Dado que hoy en día los niños acometen el aprendizaje del inglés a una edad temprana en las escuelas, es necesario saber más acerca de cómo se lleva a cabo el aprendizaje temprano de lenguas segundas en el aula, y cuáles son las metodologías que se adaptan mejor a la edad y a las necesidades de los niños. Este artículo aborda las técnicas de enseñanza y las estrategias de aprendizaje que se llevan a cabo en el aula de inglés durante los primeros años de escolarización. Los resultados apuntan a que los niños interiorizan el inglés conversando con los maestros mientras se realizan actividades encaminadas a desarrollar las cuatro destrezas.

**Palabras clave:** segunda lengua, niños, técnicas de enseñanza, proceso de aprendizaje, interacciones de conversación.

## 1. Introduction

Research studies on child L2[1] acquisition indicate that, within the adequate conditions of input and time, children exposed to more that one language at an early age develop the new grammatical systems in a natural manner, only by being exposed to the languages. The present study has a close look at the teacher's and the learner's speech during conversational interactions and provides information about the manner in which young learners process English through production. It also shows the types of activities that are being carried out in the classroom.

Firstly, background information on the child L2 acquisition process is provided; secondly, the pedagogies used by a group of teachers to present English are described; finally, useful ideas for practitioners and student teachers are considered.

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[1] L2 stands for non-native language, additional language and foreign language and L1 refers to the mother tongue.

## 2. Background

All children learn the mother tongue by being immersed in the language, by making sense of the language around them, and by interacting with adults and with other children. Children are also potentially equipped to learn more than one language simultaneously and some children are bilingual because their families have talked to them in more than one language from birth. The acquisition of an L2 that occurs after the primary language development period is successive learning.

### 2.1. EFL Teaching and Learning in the Young Learners Classroom

Studies on non-native language acquisition have tried to explain how the L2's are acquired and how two grammatical systems relate in the learner's mind. For many authors, age is an important factor influencing successful L2 learning and, as Lightbown & Spada indicate that all things being equal, learners who are exposed to an L2 continuously during early childhood may become successful learners:

> «Age is one of the characteristics that determine the way in which an individual approaches second language learning (both inside and outside the classroom), the motivation to learn, and the individual differences in aptitude for the language learning are also determining factors that affect both rate of learning and eventual success in learning» Lightbown & Spada (2006:74).

L2 learning at an early age is driven by positive evidence, and the environment and the amount of exposure time are very relevant for an early L2 learning because they determine the amount of linguistic data learners have access to and consequently, influence the language and literacy development. Language acquisition is a complex task that requires time and extended exposure to the target language and as Moon states, the teacher, as a language facilitator, plays an important role within the classroom and the linguistic setting determines the amount of input data accessible to children:

> «In a second language situation, children gain input both from inside and outside school. But in a foreign language situation, they depend almost entirely on the school for input» Moon (2000:14).

Although there are evident differences between the L1 and the L2 acquisition processes, child L2 acquisition studies suggest that childhood is a biological optimal moment for non-native language learning. Children are language receptive and when they are exposed to new linguistic data, they extract and abstract the rules and restrictions of the grammatical system around them using language learning strategies.

When children come to school at the age of 3, they are still developing the four skills, the fine and gross-motor control skills; they have little knowledge of the world; they need to move and they have very short attention span. As Genesee (1993) points out it seems logical to think that at 3,4,5 or 6 years of age, children approach additional languages in an unconscious and natural manner:

> «Bilingual development may differ from monolingual development in superficial ways, but that fundamentally they are the same. In particular bilingual children use the same inquisitional strategies as monolingual children» Genesee (1993:77).

Teaching English in English becomes an invaluable tool for communication at school and a vehicle to help learners develop holistically through all senses. According to Lyster (2007), learning languages through interaction has a pedagogical focus because interaction provides teachers and learners with strategies for facilitating comprehension, formal accuracy, academic achievement and literacy development.

## 2.2. The Multiple Intelligence theory

The rationale behind using the Multiple Intelligence theory (MI) to promote language and literacy in the young learner's classroom is to take advantage of the learners' innate language learning ability which occurs during meaningful communication with others. Young language learners pay more attention to the message they want to convey than to the form. Thus, extrapolating aspects of the L1 language learning and applying them into the L2 classroom will provide learners a rich linguistic environment.

Following the theory of the MI developed by Gardner (1983), we are thought to possess at least eight different avenues for learning (Linguistic, Mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Kinaesthetic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal and Naturalistic) and each individual is thought to possess a combination of these intelligences and has the capacity to develop all seven intelligences to a certain level.

This is encouraging for L2 language educators to promote the learners' language through the different intelligences' development by using the right learning environment and different teaching techniques. In what follows, the methodologies are like pathways 1) to teach English; 2) to stimulate the learner's individual intelligences; 3) to develop the four skills, and also 4) to be considered a choice in the lesson planning and in the curriculum development.

## 3. Method

This top-down approach focuses on language production and looks at strategies and mechanisms used by teachers and by young learners to process English language and content during classroom conversational interactions. Knowing more about the manner in which children approach English L2 in the classroom will help practitioners in planning and teaching the curriculum and will provide information to student teachers to have a better understanding of the teaching techniques and to be better able to put them into practice in class in the future.

In order to develop effective methodologies for the early years, one has to consider factors that influence the young learners inside and outside the classroom, such as: the language learning context, the learners' age, the time of exposure, and the learner's needs during the early years education.

### 3.1. Subjects and Procedure

Data for the observational study was collected from three classrooms in which young learners were taught in English L2 and the main aim was to identify the factors related to the oral skills development, and to study the correlation between the language production and the activities carried out in the young learner's classroom.

Spontaneous speech from teachers and children -from Nursery to Year 2- was collected at the British Council School of Madrid during one school year. This bilingual school takes students from 3 to 18 years of age and most of them native speakers of Spanish (98%). The learners' age of the research ranged between 3 and 7 years and the instructional focus of the classes was on subject matter, not only on language forms. This piece of research is a continuation of a previous longitudinal and cross-sectional studies carried out in the same instructional environment (Fleta, 1999).

A total of 30 hours of audio recorded classroom interaction was collected and the data was transcribed.

The tasks and the activities in which teachers and children were engaged in during the working sessions were: maths, crafts, singing, language and literacy, listening to and writing stories and playing. The data also included information about different times of the day, routines and transitional moments: taking the register and snack time; tidying up; or going to the toilet to wash their hands before lunch. The number of children in each classroom was around twenty five.

## 3.2. Data Analysis

The interlanguage consists of spontaneously produced speech at different times of the school day and reflects the opportunities that the learners had to process language through input. An analysis of the data shows that the conversations consisted of one word, two, three or more utterances; simple and compound sentences; repetitions; formulaic language; mixed code sentences; songs; rhymes and stories.

## 4. Findings and discussion

The following examples illustrate the teaching techniques and learning strategies identified during the conversations between teachers and young learners: recasting or reformulation, questioning, expansion, explicit correction, elicitation, repetition, participation, formulaic language, choral speaking, storytelling, songs chants and rhymes.

### 4.1. Recasting or reformulation

The majority of the feedback used by the teachers involved recasting. The teachers maintained the learner's intended meaning and provided different forms of feedback. Lyster (2007) explains that children frequently repeat parental recasts during L1 acquisition and likewise, recasts in the L2 young learners' classroom have a twofold purpose: to provide learners with positive evidence, and to maintain the flow of communication.

In the conversation below, the Nursery teacher is finishing reading a story to the children who are sitting on the carpet. A close look at the conversation illustrates how the teacher reformulates one child's utterance ("I finished") and gives corrective feedback ("The story has finished. I finished reading the story"). From now on Teacher (T) and Children (Ch):

T: …so the small pig runs into the mud, he sits down and sinks down into the soft good mud.
Ch: I finished [semantic error]
T: The story has finished. I finished reading the story.

Nursery Data (3/4 years old)

### 4.2. Questions

Questions are very important because they engage learners in conversations. Fisher (1995) considers that asking the right questions in class can provide children a bridge between teaching and learning. In the following example the teacher is dressing up the weather bear and asks the whole class the type of clothes the bear should wear, not only to motivate the young learners but to test vocabulary:

T: Do you think he needs his coat on today…?
Ch: No
T: No, I don't think it's cold any more.
T: So, now the weather bear has got his…
Ch: *Pantalón*
T: Who knows how to say *pantalón* in English…?
Ch: Shirt

T: Alex…?
Alex: Trousers
T: His trousers; he's just got his trousers on.
Ch:　Trousers (repetition)

<div align="right">Nursery Data (3/4 years old)</div>

### 4.3. Expansion

This technique is used by the teachers to expand information and children learn from expansions because they are like mini-lessons. In the next example the teacher is working with a small group of children on a crafts activity: making fish and plants for a fish tank:

T: … and a jelly fish…
Ch:　*medusa*
T:　with long tentacles and they hurt. Oh!, very nice… well… not very nice with long, long tentacles and they are very bad…,
Ch:　very bad (repetition)
T: … they're poisonous; if they sting you you're going to be very ill.
Ch And the snakes [semantic error]
T: Eels, eel's a very long snake that lives in the water, not snakes.

<div align="right">Reception Data (4/5 years old)</div>

### 4.4. Explicit Correction

Sometimes the teachers correct language forms explicitly. The following conversation illustrates the use of explicit correction. The teacher repeats the child's erroneous utterance ("For eat fish") and provides the correct one ("For the fish to eat").

T: Yes, fish need water, so in our fish tank we've got fish; we've also got some plants… what are the plants for?
Ch:　For eat the fish. [grammatical error]
T: no… for the fish to eat. Not to eat the fish, but the fish to eat.

<div align="right">Reception Data (4/5 years old)</div>

### 4.5. Elicitation

The teacher elicits forms from learners by asking questions such as: "In English?" "Do you want to see?" or by pausing, allowing time for the children to complete the teacher's utterance. For Fisher (1995) pausing gives learners thinking time and opportunities for re-thinking and re-stating an idea. The following example illustrates a warming up activity. The teacher is eliciting language from the children before reading the story book "Skyfire".

T: Uhm..., let me see what I've got in my bag today…
Ch:　In my bag (children repeat)
T: What do you think might be here?...
Ch:　*Una cesta*
Mrs: In English?
Ch:　Kit
T: It's a basket
Ch:　A basket, a basket… (children repeat)
Mrs: What do you think there might be in my basket?
Ch:　In my basket, in my basket (children repeat)
T: Do you think in the basket there are cakes… or apples…?
Ch:　Apples (children repeat)
T: No it's not apples. Do you want to see…?
Ch:　Yes
T: It's something yellow and white… (the teacher takes daisies out of a bag)

Ch:    Flowers
T: Flowers, flowers. These are Spring flowers.

<div align="right">Nursery Data (3/4 years old)</div>

### 4.6. Repetition

Children have a natural tendency to repeat and they learn through repetition. That's why songs, rhymes, chants and poems are ideal tools for teaching because they contain patterns and help children remember vocabulary and structures better. In the following example children are reporting about a birthday party they had been to the previous day. The teacher reformulates one child's utterance with implicit correction and the child repeats the sentence without being asked to do so. The repetition of the correct form is considered by Lyster (2007) an evidence of learning.

T: Mariano, what did you do…?
Ch:    I don't go to the party
T: I didn't go to the party (implicit correction)
Ch:    I didn't go to the party (child repeats the correct form)
T: What did you do in your house…?
Ch:    Play

<div align="right">Year 1 Data (5/6 years old)</div>

### 4.7. Participation

The teachers provide opportunities for participation inviting learners to use the language by delaying speech, pausing, and giving time to think of an answer. In the next example, the teacher is talking to the children about the Tuesdays activities.

T: Today is…………………
Ch:    …Tuesday
T: Tuesday, well done, How do you know it's Tuesday?... because I drew a tricycle and on
        Tuesdays very often if the sun shines and it doesn't …………………
Ch:    … rain
T: Then we go out and play on the play………...
Ch:    … playground
T: but only if we are……….
Ch:    … quiet
T: if you are quiet and…….
Ch:    good
T: …good, then we can go out on the tricycles.

<div align="right">Nursery Data (3/4 years old)</div>

### 4.8. Formulaic Language

The language that goes with routines and transitional moments allows learners to participate in daily activities because formulas provide children with the basic tools to participate in class from day one. Children rote-learn the formulas and formulas allow children become productive in English. The next example illustrates how children use formulas while the teacher is taking the register: "Good morning", "Not here" and "Not here today".

T: Good morning Maria...
Ch:    Good morning
T: Is Jaime here…?
Ch:    Not today
T: Good morning Luis…
Ch:    Not here today
T: Good morning Ana…
Ch:    Good morning

### 4.9. Choral speaking

This is an instructional activity for group working, to develop co-operative learning, memory, speaking, reading and listening. Collaborative tasks are ideal to enthuse young learners about speaking in public, by focusing on clarity, expression, rhythm and also by using language in a creative way. Year 1 children invented a rhyme to practice numbers and rhyming words and presented it in an assembly.

> Ch:    1, 2, 3, Do like me.
>          4, 5, 6,  Let 's play tricks.
>          7, 8, 9, That book' s mine.
>          10, 11 12,  She' s a magic girl.
>          13, 14, 15, Coming up is 16.
>          17, 18, 19, I don 't like writing.
>          20, 21, 22, What are we going to do?
>          23, 24, 25, Listen to our rhyme.

### 4.10. Songs, rhymes and chants

One of the intelligences that children develop first is the musical; thus, singing in class and singing through out the school day has many advantages for child L2 learners, among others: it stimulates both sides of the brain, the left side processes the lyrics and the right side the music and the rhythm; it tunes the learners ears to the musicality of the language; it helps refine children's articulatory skills; it develops control of vocal expression by introducing a range of pitches and volumes and it is an excellent way of introducing and reinforcing vocabulary.

Songs, rhymes and chants are used by teachers and children in the three classrooms of this study (Nursery, Reception and Year 1). In the next example the teacher is finishing reading the chapter "*Charlie found some money*" from the story "*Charlie and the chocolate factory*" and to remember the song "*Ten little Indians*" when the teacher says "Cowboys and Indians" and conversation leads the children to sing the song.

> T:       What programmes do you think Charlie likes watching on TV, what sort of programmes?
> Ch:  *Peleas*
> T: Fighting programmes, yes cowboys and Indians. Westerns.
> Ch:   "Ten little Indians song" (children start singing the song)

### 4.11. Code switching

Mixing languages is a common feature of both child and adult bilingualism. In the corpus, the interference involves Spanish terms when speaking in English and viceversa. In the majority of the cases the mixing is restricted to single words. In the example below, the teacher is asking the children what they do in the afternoons when they get home after school and one child uses "*si quiero*" and "*antes de ayer*" in Spanish. It is interesting to note here that the teacher translates the sentences giving the child implicit feedback as a teaching strategy and that in this occasion the child does not repeat the correct forms.

> T: Does anybody go to the park in the afternoons after school?
> Ch:   Me, when comes to my house my father say to *si quiero*
> T: if you want…
> Ch:   go to the park and, *antes de ayer*
> T: The day before yesterday…
> Ch:   (child doesn't repeat)

T: …and what do you say?...
Ch:   … say "no"
T: No, why?
Ch:   … want play house
T: Because she wanted to play at home, you were tired, maybe, or was it raining?
Ch:   It was sunny… and in my house is play to the Lunnies in the computer
T: You played the Lunies on the computer.

<div align="right">Year 2 Data (6/7 years old)</div>

This section has focused on the young learners' communicative competence and shows how children are learning to build up sentences in English and how the teachers are presenting the L2 to the children by carrying out a series of tasks in the classroom.

## 5. Conclusion

Findings show that young learners were at a pre-literate stage, learning language and content, and carrying out activities individually, in pairs and in groups. The activities presented to the children in the classrooms supported the understanding and the use of English and promoted the language use in a variety of ways: listening, imitating, singing, speaking, choral speaking, telling, retelling, reading and writing.

The pedagogical techniques used by the teachers provide evidence on the strong correlation between the activities carried out in class and the type of input and output data. Corpora show that by immersing children in English and by stimulating them holistically, they developed the four skills in English L2.

The major findings of this observational study can be extrapolated to other schools because at an early age, all children learn languages by listening and by speaking them. Moreover, the classroom is the common context in which language learning takes place at schools, in spite of the local conditions that make schools different from each other, such as the available resources and the time available for teaching.

## 6. Pedagogical Implications

As for what may be useful for teachers and student teachers, this report indicates that the learners' age and abilities, the input data, and the linguistic environment matter in great manner at the beginning with young learners. The present findings may contribute to design effective pedagogies by promoting the use of English in class.

In order to help all children make the best possible progress, teachers should call attention to the role of conversation in acquiring English L2 at an early age at school, and as a consequence, plan opportunities for the children to engage in speaking and listening activities first; and later, in reading and writing activities. To promote language use, teachers should plan activities such as: singing, choral speaking, acting out, reading, writing, listening to and telling stories with visual support and authentic audio models.

As language facilitators, teachers should take advantage of daily routines and transitional moments and the language that goes with these moments because formulas help establish a safe and predictable context and help develop communicative skills. When planning the curriculum, teachers should provide students with formulaic language and encourage the use of it.

Young learners should participate actively in the school life and try to communicate in English as much

as possible for greetings, routines, learning activities or leave taking. Less number of hours equals less exposure to the input data, thus, the intensity of instruction should be higher. Teachers, as linguistic models, should create an environment that facilitates conversational interaction and plan activities to communicate in English and to participate in the classroom life from day one, from start to finish, and everywhere at school (classroom, playground, corridors, or dining-room).

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