Teaching English To Children: A Unique, Challenging Experience For Teachers, Effective Teaching Ideas

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Abstract

It is fundamentally essential for children to learn English from a young age in this rapidly globalizing world. English knowledge will help to open many opportunities for them in the future and it will be invaluable in their future careers. However, teaching English to children is not an easy job. But it is also not difficult, if we already know how to do it. Many teaching positions involve teaching children - a unique experience that is both challenging and fun. Compared to adults, children are more energetic, have shorter attention spans, and learn language according to specific stages of development; these present planning challenges for the teacher. The key to teaching English to children is to understand the principles of language acquisition and apply it in ways that keep children motivated to learn. Children’s world is playing and imitating. The present paper deals with the following subjects: what are the principles of teaching English to children, what are the characteristics of a language teacher, why do we teach children a foreign language, teachers social and psychological preparation, the emotional and physical aspects of young learners, the teachers main roles in class, a review of TPR, and finally some practical tips and teaching techniques for beginner teachers of English language.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Why do we teach children a new language?

Language as a means of communication plays very important role in social relationship among human beings. The English Language is the first foreign language we teach to children at very early stages of schooling. The primary aim of teaching English in the early years of schooling is to motivate young learners to be ready and have self-confident in learning English at higher levels of education. Some children are born to parents who polyglots, so they have to acquire two or three different languages. Some others learn second or third language because they are to immigrate to a new country. Nowadays language learning is essential needed for children who want to immigrate to other countries to follow the educational systems and to become useful members or citizens of those countries.

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1.2 The Characteristics of Children

In learning language, children begin learning simple expressions. Broadly speaking, children learn abstract rules of language from which they listen, and even they also learn expressions that they have never heard before. It is extremely important that teachers not only get children to learn language, but they also encourage them to learn it positively. Teaching of English for Children has been of particular concerns. For this reason, in teaching children English, there are some characteristics of whom presented by Scott and Lisbeth (1992). Children aged 8-10 are mature enough; They have a particular point of view; They are able to describe the difference between facts and fictions; They are curious of asking questions; They believe in what is said and the real world to express and comprehend meaning/message; They have distinct opinions about what they like and what they dislike; They are open to what happens in the classroom and begin asking a teacher's decision; and They can cooperate with each other and learn from others.

Scott and Lisbeth (1992) say that children particularly aged 8-10 are competent mother tongue users. In this regard, they are aware of basic linguistic rules of their mother tongue. At these ages, children can grasp abstracts and symbols, generalize language, and systematize it. Children are also capable of interpreting meaning without understanding. Widodo, Teaching Children 237 words separately, are competent in using language creatively, are frequently fond of doing exploration and making a certain condition enjoyable; have established imagination; and are fond of communicating (Halliwell, 1992). In the context of teaching, most people assume that children learn a foreign language in the same way that they learn their mother tongue. Basically, children are potential in acquiring and learning a foreign language, and even they learn it more quickly than those who are learning the foreign language after puberty (McLaughlin, 1978). On the contrary, children are less capable of absorbing or acquiring a foreign language optimally (Long, 1990). Hashemi (2008) believes that teaching to children is a delicate and sensitive task for the following reasons:

- Language learning class for them is their first year of schooling
- They are highly motivated and energetic
- They are new sponges to absorb
- They have various language back grounds
- They are easily frustrated if corrected immediately
- They are ready to imitate and participate
- They love group work
- They love independence
- They need respect and attention
- They easily learn from their environments
- They are great competitors

1.3 Language Teaching to Children

Tell me, I forget. Show me, I remember. Involve me, I understand. (Ancient Chinese Proverb). Children tend to have shorter attention spans and a lot of physical energy. They are very much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible phenomena. As Scott and Ytreberg (1990, 2) describe, “Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times.”. Teaching English to children is different from teaching English to adults. According to Harmer (2001: 38), young learners learn differently from adult learners. They easily get bored, losing interest after a short period of time. In order to keep them engaged it is necessary to supplement the activities with lots of brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets, or objects. Using these activities, a language teacher can make the language input enjoyable and comprehensible as well. A great teaching idea is to collect useful resources of toys, puppets, pictures, maps, calendars, and other paraphernalia and saving them for use in each other’s classes. Using gestures and body language are very effective for young learners to gain understanding of language. Moreover, it is recommended that teachers keep children active and motivated, using a song, story, game, or a teacher-made activity. In James Asher’s (1977) method, Total Physical Response (TPR), children listen and physically respond to a series of instructions or commands from the teacher. The more fun the activities, the better they will remember the language materials presented. One way to
make the learning more fun is to involve students in the creation of the visuals or realia. Having children involved in creating the visuals that are related to the lesson helps engage students in the learning process by introducing them to the context as well as to relevant vocabulary items. Language teachers can use language related arts and crafts activities while making or drawing the visuals. Certainly students are more likely to feel interested and invested in the lesson and will probably take better care of the materials (Moon 2000). We can get students to draw different characters or even create puppets. For younger students who can not even draw well, make them copy what you or other learners draw on the board. You may use the puppets to dramatize the dialogues or check their comprehension of the story and have them practice the dialogue using their puppets. If you are not an artist you had better consult an art teacher or a friend to help you draw and color the flash cards. Ask the learners to bring their own toys to English class. Use “show and tell” technique presentation that gives students a chance to introduce their objects in English. Since young learners have short attention spans, it is recommended to move quickly from activity to activity. Do not stay more than 10 minutes on any single activity because children tend to become bored easily. It is a good idea to use thematic unit planning because it builds a larger context within which students can learn language. When teaching English to young learners this way, you can incorporate many activities, songs, and stories that build on students’ knowledge and recycle language throughout the unit.

Haas (2000) supports the use of thematic unit planning for young foreign language learners by pointing out that “Foreign language instruction for children can be enriched when teachers use thematic units that focus on content-area information, engage students in activities in which they must think critically, and provide opportunities for students to use the target language in meaningful contexts and in new and complex ways.” A good way to plan a unit is to explore what content your students are learning in their other classes and develop English lessons using similar content. Since children easily make links to their home cultures, it is has always been a good idea to relate the language and content to students’ home culture to personalize the lesson and provide them with an opportunity to link the new content and language to their own lives and experience. Remember that children enjoy repetition any time and any place. Practice basic routines in the classroom so that you can manage them in the class.

According to Cameron (2001, 10) “…we can see how classroom routines, which happen every day may provide opportunities for language development.” Practice real authentic material in the class from the very beginning. Most of the teachers today are encouraged to teach English through English, especially at the younger ages. One reason is to give students the maximum exposure to the English language. But using their mother tongue as the last choice may make the meaning of some troublesome expression or word clear in a shorter period of time. We are usually given a limited amount of time in many classroom situations, so that time is too precious to waste. To make the meaning of the new words comprehensible, the teacher can use visuals, realia, and gestures.

1.4 What is TPR (Total Physical Response) Method?

TPR is a method of teaching language developed by James Asher of San Jose State University in California. It is based on the premise that the human brain has a biological program for acquiring any natural language on earth - including the sign language of the deaf. The process is visible when we observe how infants internalize their first language (Asher, 2001; Asher, 2002). It has been used successfully with students who are learning a second language (Asher, 1966). When TPR is used at an English class, the teacher gestures, models, and says the commands to the students, and the students respond by imitating the teacher.

1.4.1 The theories and principles behind TPR

- **L1 language acquisition theories**
  
  Children are exposed to huge amounts of language input before speaking. Language learners can also benefit from following this “natural” progression from comprehension to production, instead of the more normal situation where learners are asked to produce instantly.

- **Brain Lateralization into right and left hemispheres**
The left brain can be described as logical, one-track, and cynical. It is used when analyzing, talking, discussing, etc. Most classroom activities in Japan are aimed at the left brain. The right brain is used when moving, acting, using metaphor, drawing, pointing, etc. It is targeted by sports and extra-curricular activities in Japanese schools. When language is taught by lecturing or explaining, the cynical left brain is targeted and the information is kept in short term memory (if at all). It is soon forgotten as it never becomes “real” to the student. When language is taught actively through movement, the right brain “believes” the information and retains it, in the same way that skills such as swimming or riding a bicycle are remembered long term.

- Affective filter and stress reduction

Students learn better when they are relaxed and stress free. This is because the affective filter, a mental barrier between the students and the information, is raised when students are nervous or uncomfortable. When the affective filter is high, learners find it harder to understand, process, and remember information. TPR helps reduce the affective filter because it is less threatening than traditional language activities. Students do not have to produce language. Mistakes are unimportant and easily (and painlessly) corrected by the teacher. Language is remembered easily and long-term.

1.5 The characteristics of language teachers who teach to children

Teaching English to children is not an easy job. But it is also not difficult, if we already know how to do it. Many researchers do believe that a successful language teacher of children should possess some characteristics as follows:

- Must be energetic and patient.
- Must love children.
- Must pay attention to individual differences.
- Must encourage, encourage, and encourage.
- Must let children see the beautiful and useful aspects of the language.
- Must let them love you as the language teacher and the new language as well.
- Must know the techniques of teaching.
- Must respect children as human.
- Must start teaching to children as soon as possible.

1.5 Some teaching tips for new teachers

Teachers of adults may need to re-think their approach when teaching children. Carol Read

Nowadays, language teachers of adults are required to teach classes of children most of whom without any specialized training. Teaching English to children, should be enjoyable, interesting, repetitive, and understandable. In doing so, there should be appropriate methods and techniques for teaching English to them. When you become a teacher of children, you are no longer just a language teacher, you are also an educator. There are some helpful ideas to incorporate into the language classroom. These ideas come from the discussions and experience and researches done by teachers and professionals.

- Switch to simple English in the class
- Speak clearly and concisely
- Use the board most of the time
- Use enjoyable language learning games
- Have a sense of humor
- Let them listen to music and watch cartoons in English
- Don’t forget background music when teaching or assigning them some tasks
- Use cassettes and CDs for modeling if you are not a native speaker
- Observe successful language classes for teaching tips
- Use pantomime and body language when necessary
- Get your real objects to the class
- Pay attention to seating arrangement of the children
• Call them by their first names or give them some new English names
• Budget your time, don’t be in a rush
• Check their home works regularly but not seriously
• Have a video recording of your classroom
• Give them break some times
• Be well dressed

Remember: We Learn Teaching By Teaching.

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