

FITTING THE SYLLABUS AND METHOD TO THE YOUNG LEARNER

Introducing foreign-language instruction to young primary school children requires developing specific learning programmes and teaching methods appropriate to learners aged 7-8.

This chapter deals with the relevant psycho-social characteristics of this age group, and gives suggestions on how to adjust classroom teaching to the needs, interests and general maturational level of 7- to 8-year-olds. It is based on observations from teaching practice. Stressing the importance of building teaching strategies upon an insight into the world of young learners, the article presents a learner-centred approach.

Initial motivation

First graders have *positive starting attitudes* towards foreign-language learning and can be successful, within individual limits, provided that the learning process does not become a frustrating experience. They are usually uninhibited and only rarely self-conscious. They take to using a foreign language more naturally than children with a few years of schooling experience. Apart from the aptitude for imitation, this may be the reason why they pronounce new sounds with greater confidence. Young primary school children are very curious, easily prompted, open to influences and eager to enrich their awareness of the world. It is the teacher's task to foster these initial factors of motivation. Although young children are self-oriented and preoccupied with their immediate environment, their interests can easily be extended to include unusual and imaginative topics. A humoristic approach can always help to arouse interest and reduce boredom.

Specific difficulties

However, when teaching children of this age we also have to cope with specific difficulties caused by *lack of learning experience*, *lack of concepts* and *absence of working habits*. Things which go without saying with older children may present problems, for example some children tend to skip pages in their notebooks or open them from left to right. Lack of concepts may sometimes puzzle a child while accomplishing a task, or produce a break in communication similar to that Faulkner describes in *Light in August*: "The child didn't answer. He had never seen a home, so there was nothing for him to say about it. And he was not old enough to talk and say nothing at the same time."

For these reasons we should not suppose that input equals intake. Children sometimes can not follow the teacher even in their mother tongue.

Children's *sense of reality* differs a great deal from that of adults. On the one hand, the world of make-believe, imaginative situations and characters, or play-activities can be much more real to a 7-year-old than the actual everyday world. On the other hand, children can unmistakably sense a contrived situation, a meaningless task or a false attitude, and find ways to refuse collaboration.

Children of this age also have a *different sense of relevance*. We cannot assume that what seems relevant to us will also make sense to them. Having fun and satisfying immediate curiosity are the things that matter with first- and second-graders. Specific language-learning goals (e.g., reading and writing for the sake of practice) are quite meaningless to them. Therefore we should always try to link instruction to entertainment and devise fun activities with non-linguistic objectives. Children can have no long range purposes. They want to see immediate results of their activities, either in the form of an obvious outcome (a lost key is found) or in the form of reward for a successfully accomplished task (words of approval or encouragement).

In spite of their love of movement, children of this age have *poor sense of spatial relations*. They have difficulties in orientation and have poor feeling for distance. The layout of pages in their notebooks exhibits lack of feeling for space and distribution of elements. When writing, some children show no ability to predict how much space a word can take. No wonder that they also have difficulties with grasping the meaning of prepositions and other terms of spatial relations. So, we had better not attempt to teach those terms systematically.

Children's needs

One of the most important needs that has to be taken into consideration while working with young learners is their *need for emotional security*. Their learning potentials can be fully exploited only in a positive affective atmosphere. Emotions are the starting point of learning. It is common knowledge that children learn best what they like best; and they like what gives them pleasure or fosters their self-esteem. Negative emotions do not help learning. Children are not self-critical and consequently easily get hurt. It follows that we should try to secure success, or at least an illusion of success, for each child in order to help him/her form a positive self-image. Since the affective factor plays such a crucial role in the teaching/learning process, it is of vital importance that we create a tension-free, supportive learning environment of good will, mutual respect and confidence, which can work as a powerful source of information.

Underlying classroom activities there is always all sorts of social interaction among children, which consumes their time and energies, and can sometimes paralyse their

learning abilities. This *need for self-realization within the peer-group* cannot be overlooked since it has far-reaching implications for the teaching process. Children seek security in belonging to a group and their self-confidence depends on whether they are recognized by the peer group or not. In search of recognition they imitate their peers, but also find fault with them or mock the less successful ones. Young children demand constant individual attention on the part of the teacher, which in groups of 12-17, or even larger, cannot be secured for all of them. So they try to draw the teacher's attention by putting in remarks in a loud voice, or being "naughty". Therefore teaching tasks should be designed so that each child has an opportunity to be in some way successful. For example, tasks with a number of equally acceptable solutions or easily attainable aims. Open questions based on an information gap have more positive educational implications than those which require one definitive answer. We should also be aware of the possible emotional and social consequences of competition games, formal evaluation, our remarks of encouragement or criticism. Moreover, children can find explicit teaching humiliating and try to avoid it by not paying attention to what is going on in the classroom. Introducing language items casually through pleasurable activities can be more effective. Similarly, overt correction does not help children to gain confidence.

Children *need to be physically active*, and sitting still is a real torture for most of them. Instead of suppressing the considerable energy the children have for, we can channel it to purposeful activities. Applying the activity-based methodology we can bring action into everything. It means a lot to a 7-year-old to come to the front of the classroom just to remove something on the board or take something out of a box. Physical involvement makes children happy because they can move and change position, but also because they are for a moment the protagonists of a classroom activity. Tasks which require change of place range from P.E. lessons and play-acting to miming, action songs and simulation games such as: cooking, shopping or having meals. For the same reason all kinds of dramatic activities provide one of the most successful devices in foreign-language teaching. There is another reason why it is advisable to introduce bodily movement into language classes: connecting the act of speech with gestures helps memorization.

How children learn

The cognitive development of the 7-8 age-group is at the *stage of concrete operations*. It is characterized by absence of logical connections on an abstract level. For this reason no attempts at analysing can give results with children of average abilities. In spite of approximately the same chronological age, there are striking differences in mental

age; some children are below and some are above the standard. *Young children learn by acquiring language patterns spontaneously*, moving slowly from one concrete example to another, making inductive generalizations on a preconscious level. In terms of methodology this suggests that children should learn by doing. They should be actively involved in handling tasks that will make them figure out how language works through making and testing hypotheses. This teaching strategy requires a long input phase, the so-called “rule incubation period”, in which they can accumulate language experience before language production. During the practice phase it is important to relate language items to purposeful activities which may create functional needs for the use of language. It follows that young children learn slowly, need extensive input, varied practice and frequent recycling of language items. The whole process is time-consuming and we can do little to accelerate it.

In spite of the absence of abstract logical thinking, we must not underestimate the creative abilities of children. They can show remarkable creativity in handling challenging tasks which provoke creative responses (imagining, guessing, lying). I have noticed that this kind of creativity vanishes after a year or so, probably due to the general trends in teaching practice which tend to impose rules of thinking.

Young learners can be easily distracted. Their *attention span is short*, and they get bored or fed up with an activity after a few minutes. Their interest can be easily aroused, but does not last long. First-graders can engage in drawing and similar activities for about 15 minutes, and in other kinds of activities for only 4-5 minutes. Activities which require mental effort can last even shorter. The methodological implication would be that we have to vary the pace and character of instructional techniques and change them at first signs of fatigue or boredom. Activities which involve rhythm, like break chants, can best serve the purpose of changing pace. Another effective device is to surprise the children by changing the subject abruptly and directing their attention to a new area of interest. Preparatory phases to classroom activities (arranging seats, preparing requisites, dressing up and distributing roles) can be amusing and, at the same time, linguistically as useful as activities themselves, because the element of expectation focuses the pupils' attention.

Syllabus design

The above points should be considered in light of syllabus design. *The choice of context* is also of extreme importance for successful teaching. We must avoid trivialities, naïve commonplace situations and emotionally flat topics. They bring boredom into classroom and also have far-reaching negative consequences. When choosing the content we must either relate it to the children themselves and draw upon their knowledge of

the world, or devise imaginative, funny or even absurd situations. If we start pretending to see something in an empty box, the children will gladly join in, showing much more interest than when there actually is something in it.

In order to integrate language objectives with content study it is a good idea to include a selection of *topics from the other subjects* of the curriculum. This can provide a meaningful setting for language study *shifting linguistic aims to practical ones*, as well as opportunities for conceptual development. But the most desirable context in classroom teaching is what the actual situation offers. We must always make use of what comes up and introduce related language.

Young children *experience the world round them in a holistic way*, in contrast with the analytic approach of adults. While preparing puppets and scenery for a puppet-show based on Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs, I asked my second-grade pupils to classify the following words into two categories: castle, mirror, Snow-White, dwarfs, queen, wood, prince, apple, hunter and cottage. My intention was to engage one group in designing scenery and the other in designing characters. To my surprise the children put the queen, the mirror and the castle into one group, the dwarfs, the wood, the cottage and Snow-White into the other group, but had difficulties with the hunter, the prince and the apple as to where they belonged. In line with this we can understand why children can easily remember clusters of contextually related words, which should be kept in mind when designing the syllabus.

Conclusion

Since it is impossible to change young learners and make them fit into the programmes and teaching methods devised for older children, judicious alterations should be made in methodological approaches as well as in details of teaching procedures in order to adapt them to 7- or 8-year-olds. By respecting children's characteristics and meeting their needs we can enhance motivation for foreign-language learning and ensure successful teaching.