

# Section 3: FOCUSING ON THE YOUNG LEARNER CLASSROOM

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## ARE AVAILABLE TEACHING TIME AND THE NUMBER OF PUPILS IMPORTANT FACTORS?

This chapter deals with teaching English as a foreign language in a primary school in Zagreb, Croatia, to young learners: 6- or 7-year-old boys and girls, first graders. Two groups of learners were being observed: one group of 15 pupils having 45-minute English classes five days a week within the Project, and the other, a group of 30 pupils, having 45-minute English classes two days a week. The chapter endeavours to show how the age factor, available teaching time and number of pupils in a group modify techniques of instruction.

The first part of the paper sets forth some observations from practical teaching concerning learner personality and teaching conditions. In the second part teaching techniques will be considered in terms of how personality and teaching conditions modify the choice of teaching techniques.

### Personality of a pupil

For most developmental psychologists the age of six or seven denotes a boundary-line between the age of preschool and school children. In practice, this boundary-line means that some children still retain the characteristic behaviour of a preschool child and some already show characteristics of personality typical for school children.

The theoretical assumption that children of that age perform various activities faster and more accurately than before does not always hold true. The slow and clumsy movements the children make when doing very simple tasks such as putting things in and out of a schoolbag; dressing and undressing; following the instructions of the teacher can still be observed quite frequently. For some pupils the teacher is still a surrogate mother, who helps button and unbutton coats, zip jackets, tie shoelaces, comb hair, take out pencil-boxes or notebooks – the first grader still does not know which notebook is which. These pupils are slow when faced with simple commands like: stand in line, turn to somebody, join hands, sit on the chair. For more complex tasks like pulling a string through a hole, sticking together two pieces of paper with glue most of them need help from the teacher.

Children are still not used to sitting on a chair for 45 minutes, most of them have an urgent need to move around during the class period. Such behaviour requires a

special approach when teaching in the classroom. Children should have a chance to stretch, change places, exercise or walk around several times during the class period. They are very enthusiastic when they imitate animals moving around the woods, cars in the streets, fish in the sea, birds in the sky, trees in the wind or the like, actions included in the topic of a lesson. Children enjoy themselves if the teacher tells a story accompanied by movements and miming and lets them do the like; if teaching occurs in different places in the classroom during the class period; if children act and dramatize; if they often go to the blackboard to perform a task; if they walk toward each other to communicate.

First graders are still learning how to control their emotions. Some of them are already calm and collected while some still react spontaneously, jump and hug the teacher to express their attachment, fight pupils who “hurt” them, loudly express their pleasure or dissatisfaction as soon as they experience something during the class period. A pupil can interrupt the teacher with a minor remark which will, however, lead to a total loss of interest in what the teacher is saying or even stop the course of work in the classroom.

At this age some children often experience fear, real or imaginary. The child then becomes shy, speaks in a very low voice, refuses to talk or take part in class activities. He needs to feel protected by somebody. The brave ones will ask the teacher for help – whisper into the teacher’s ear that he got new shoes from his mother, or that he wants to go out of the class. But some will refuse to come to the blackboard or answer a question by just nodding their head or simply showing no sign of comprehension. If the teacher, who usually stands in front of some thirty pupils, decides to approach the shy one, then all the other pupils’ attention will, by following the teacher, be turned toward the frightened child who is, thus, exposed to an unpleasant situation rather than protected. The fear of public appearance in front of other children and the teacher often prevents involvement in class activities. How to help children to take part, to talk? If the teacher applies a CLL technique – the teacher “whispers” a translated sentence to the pupil who repeats it after her – the teacher is no more a critic, a viewer, an audience; she becomes an assistant and a help, like a prompter in the theatre. The child feels that what he utters must be good because it was told him by the teacher. If theatre props (i.e., magic wand, hat, bag, doll, etc.) are used, children seem to forget about their fear – they are completely engaged in the object which attracts them and protects them; the object they hold seems to diminish their fear (a hat hides them, a doll takes care of them). And the rest of the class is not paying attention to the child, but rather to the props he is using. If you put an old rag over Cinderella’s shoulders and a magic wand in a fairy’s hands, squat behind their backs and whisper a short text (I haven’t got a dress. – Here’s your dress.), you have a show going on in front of the class, a show which everybody wants to take part in because the actors get attractive things (rags, magic wand) and they are not expected to know anything.

If a nice doll or a puppy or a rabbit talks to a pupil instead of the teacher, the pupil tends to forget where he is and who is really speaking and the fear seems to disappear.

A child who, before going to school, felt protected in the family or nursery now has to face a situation where most, if not all, of the children are strangers to him. He has to fight for his place in a group. He starts to compare himself with others, he wants his teacher to say he is the best; he will not get praise from other pupils – children are not likely to say somebody is better than themselves, they are still very egocentric. It is useful, then, to plan activities where children perform tasks together, in a group. When doing group work they often complain about the work of others, they often want to change both what they are doing and who they are doing it with, they criticize others if the group was “unsuccessful”, sometimes they even have arguments. Children need to be trained for group work very patiently and for a long time. In the beginning it is often a matter of acquiring a new technique of work rather than acquiring the subject-matter.

To ask another child to answer a question is often a problem for a first grader because he seems to forget, or perhaps does not understand, that what is important is performing the task – asking a question – and not who will perform task – giving the answer. A child who has to choose another to answer a question often thinks longer about the person than about the task itself: the task itself does not seem to be important at all. To find a person in the class is again new and often very difficult for a six-year-old, although it is not closely connected with language skills. If, however, the teacher asks a child to find a friend in the class, then his pondering and hesitation involve language learning – he is working on the concept, the notion of the word “friend”.

A six-year-old does not think in a way a grown-up person does (Piaget, Vigotski). While thinking he uses notions referring to perceptible reality. He is attracted by objects and situations he sees around himself. These can be toys, real objects, pictures. He wants to take the object in his hands, touch it, hug it, feel it close to him. Children make conclusions on the basis of objects they have in their hands or what they see in front of them. I have also noticed that some children can hardly concentrate on more than one feature of the shown object. When the pupil has to choose a long blue block among blocks of different sizes and colours, he will often choose only the blue one or only the long one. Very few pupils can notice both features. Noise can often be heard in the classroom, especially when drawing. This is loud, self-centred speech which accompanies the child’s actions; it is not directed towards other pupils. Child self-centredness is also shown in the lack of need for interpersonal communication, thus communication becomes another skill to be taught and practiced as a new technique of work in class.

## Educational framework

The circumstances in which English is being taught in the two groups are different. The experimental group of 15 pupils has English classes five days a week. The group of 30 pupils has English classes twice a week. The experimental group has, thus, the opportunity to acquire English as a foreign language in situations close to those in which children acquire English as a second language, whereas the group of 30 has less teaching-time available and the focus is on learning English as a foreign language rather than on English as a second language acquisition. The following comparison will show what differences arise from such different conditions.

Group of 15 pupils	Group of 30 pupils
English classes 5 days a week	English classes 2 days a week
learning topics can be chosen by individual pupils,	learning topics are chosen by the teacher,
children repeat and reproduce spontaneously utterances which they find likeable or interesting,	children repeat utterances which the teacher thinks are interesting or useful for them,
children take part in various activities in the class in a day-to-day sequence after presentation of a new topic,	children sometimes wait two or three weeks until they have the opportunity to take part in one of the activities done in the class during presentation,
there are various kinds of interaction between children and teacher (e.g., private conversation, practical help, the teacher as a playmate, etc.),	predominantly teacher-centred, the teacher conducts the work in the class aiming at the teaching unit, trying to achieve control over a large group of children,
the teacher can be a friend in need; she can find time to talk to individual pupils during class period,	there is a practical and psychological distance between teacher and pupil due to predominant teacher-centred work which engages the teacher's attention completely
children "learn" in various ways from the very beginning of the course (sitting on the floor, standing, roaming around the classroom, going out of the class, etc.),	it is useful to adapt teaching techniques and the structure of the lesson to those used by the children's class teacher in the first school months (six-year-olds find it confusing to behave differently in the same school; various ways of learning have to be taught as well as the language),
all children have a chance to speak and listen during class,	only some children have a chance to speak and listen (the extroverts impose themselves upon the others who sometimes do not even have a chance to listen because of the noise in the classroom),

inattentiveness during one class does not essentially influence the process of language acquisition,	inattentiveness during one class tends to result in failure (the learning process is structured, the pupil proceeds step by step: presentation – practice – repetition – presentation...),
one unplanned, unprepared or educationally unsuccessful class does not lead to failure (there is a possibility of trying out new techniques and ideas which is an alluring and relaxing challenge for the teacher),	one unplanned, unprepared or educationally unsuccessful class may lead to failure,
one missed class in a week has almost no influence on the learning process,	one missed class may result in “10 days on end without English”
assessment of pupil participation and knowledge implies continuous observation of children and their personality.	assessment of pupil participation and knowledge refers to periodical observation of the part the child plays in class through the few utterances he has the opportunity to make.

### Teaching implications

Although children in both groups are the same age, the techniques of instruction are not the same due to the educational framework in which the teaching occurs. There are certain limitations and drawbacks when working with a larger group:

- Handiwork that the teacher chooses to carry out in the class depends on the skills of the six-year-olds, that is, which operations they are able to handle on their own. In a group of 15 the teacher can choose more difficult tasks for the pupils than in a group of 30 because she will have time to give a hand to those who are not skillful enough. It is possible, for example, to make Halloween paper masks only in a group of 15 because making a hole in the paper using a pencil, pulling an elastic band through it and making a knot is quite a task for six-year-olds. They ask for the teacher’s help and become rather frustrated if they are not helped immediately. To make a paper Christmas tree sticking several identical parts together is not too difficult a task if the child gets already cut out shapes. To colour the tree and decorations on the cut-outs is easy and enjoyable. All of the children do not finish colouring at the same time, so the teacher has enough time to lend a hand with gluing to those who need help. Thus it is possible to carry out this activity in a group of 30.
- The choice of games is also limited by the number of children in a group. A group of 15 can easily play the London Bridge game (Kohl & Young, 1972) where, in the end, the two teams have a tug of war. But in the group of 30, even if one has two bridges in the class, it may get out of control and some pupils can even be hurt.
- Only a group of 15 can work in different places in the classroom during one class. In a group of 30 the majority of children watch the movements of a few.

If all of them are involved, then the movements they make are rather static – children stand by their desks moving their arms, heads or legs. The teacher has to have strict control over the 30 pupils who are always ready to push, hit or fight a child standing next to them or start an argument about “their own place” or simply roam around or the like. Thus it is not only an exhausting activity for the teacher but for the children too, for they may hurt each other and the teacher has to follow the children’s movements closely. The elements of fun, freedom and relaxation are lost – children are shackled by others.

- In a group of 15 where changes of place and pace are the rule the teacher can easily approach a timid child without attracting attention of others. The teacher thus has a chance to throw out a word, pat, hug or even talk to a frightened child.
- The teacher can let a group of 15 choose a mini-group on their own because she will have enough time to intervene in case of misunderstanding or argument. Free choice of a mini-group is hardly possible in a group of 30 in the first months of teaching. The pupils have to be trained to choose a mini-group of their own. It can take up the whole class time and cause turmoil in the classroom.
- When working with a group of 15 each child can easily experience real objects in the class by touch for there will be time for all of them to hold it, if not in one class period, then in the next – it will be in the class a few days in a sequence. When working with a group of 30 the teacher should carefully choose big, easily seen objects and details (e.g., eyes, ears) so that when showing them to the class all the pupils are able to see, even those who are eight meters away from the teacher. However, the object seen in this way stays remote and rather abstract for most of the children. Only some will hold it in their hands, touch it, feel it. And then the argument starts in the class – who has had it, for how long, why only “him” or “her” and not “me” and the like, which diverts attention.

This short review of experience in teaching English to six-year-old first graders in the “Tin Ujević” primary school focuses on three elements of the teaching process – personality of the pupil, teaching conditions and techniques of instruction. The teacher faces and has to cope with these on a daily basis in complex teaching situations. However, theory of language learning deals with each element as a separate entity and the practising teacher may not always find it easy to apply the theory. The questions of psychophysical development in children, school curriculum, the actual conditions in which teaching occurs and choice of teaching techniques that enable successful achievement of the chosen curriculum are questions to be dealt with by a team of qualified experts and educational authorities. A single practising teacher should not be left to cope with practical teaching situations on her own.

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