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Teaching English to Very Young Learners

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Abstract

This study presents a review of the literature concerning teaching English to very young learners as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) as how to teach English to VYL is a prevailing research subject in an ESL/EFL context. As Cameron (2001) states very young learners are exposed to only spoken language for a few years, it is of great significance to handle it meticulously. The paper first presents the characteristics of VYL and the role of age in language learning. Next, the paper reviews the studies on second/foreign language teaching to VYL, concluding that the earlier is the better in language education with the appropriate use of various methods and materials appeal to learners' interests. While this paper emphasizes that very limited number of studies have been done, it reveals there is an urgent need for elaborate researches, especially in EFL context.

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1. Introduction

Children start preschool at the age of 5-6 before they enter primary school in Turkey, in the United States, and in many other countries. At these ages, they are naturally curious and enthusiastic to explore the world around them. Most children are eager to gain new experiences including learning a new language. They like to be active and have a lot of energy which make preschool perfect time to benefit from physical activities to teach a language.

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2. Characteristics of Very Young Learners

Very young learners create their own learning engaging with their environment and they are active in their learning process by exploring immediate settings (Piaget, 1970). According to Vygotsky (1962), children construct knowledge through social interaction. Within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), children acquire knowledge through interaction with other people. Working within ZPD helps children reach their optimum capacity to solve problems with assistance. Children learn effectively through scaffolding with the help or guidance of an adult or more proficient peer (Bruner, 1983). It is not only the repetition of sounds they receive, instead, they develop rules and prove their assumptions to figure out for themselves (Wells, 1999). They need to involve in hands-on experiences for effective learning (Donaldson, 1978 & Hughes, 1986). As young learners have a lot of energy but minimum concentration, it is better to engage them in physical activities within concrete environment. As Scott and Ytreberg (1990) asserts that immediate world around them always prevails and it is their hands and eyes and ears that they use to understand this world. Furthermore, if children create their own visuals and realia, they will probably engage and interested in the activities and take more responsibility for the materials (Moon, 2000).

As Susan Halliwell states “We are obviously not talking about classrooms where children spend all their time sitting still in rows and talking only to teacher” (1992:18). Therefore, it is the teacher who provides a variety of experiences and a set of activities without getting them bored. Children are creative and want to be active so it is better to make use of their imagination and energy in games, songs, drawing pictures or puzzle-like activities. Children, especially boys, are not tend to sit still and sometimes resort to aggression probably because of the changes in hormones, following with high energy (Biddulph, 1998). In addition, compared to the boys, little girls are better in linguistic skills, fine motor skills and concentration while boys are unable to keep up them by up to one year (Khan, 1998; Biddulph, 1998; McIlvain, 2003).

In classroom activities, using Total Physical Response (TPR) by James Asher (1977) is a great way to teach English especially for very young learners. That method keeps children active in learning process while it links the language with physical movement. Young learners are easily distracted and have very short attention spans; therefore, it is better to keep in mind that 5 and 10 minutes activities are best to engage them in learning. According to Scott and Ytreberg (1990), there should be various activities having a balance among them. It is suggested that each task focuses on different skills while using individual, pair work, group work or whole class activities alternately. It is also wise to let children learn from each other by integrating pupil- pupil interaction into the activities in addition to teacher- pupil interaction. Lastly, Scott and Ytreberg (1990) point out the balance between quiet and noisy activities to create both peaceful and dynamic learning environment.

Moreover, using stories in foreign language teaching is of great value as they are naturally acquired and contextualized (Slatterly & Willis, 2001). Stories use a “holistic approach to language teaching and learning that places a high premium on children’s involvement with rich, authentic uses of the foreign language” (Cameron, 2001:159). Cameron (2001) indicates a mental processing called ‘mentalese’ which is used in formulating meaning language independently. Therefore, when children are told a story in foreign language, they are able to get the gist and summarize it with the help of visuals in their first language. However, it is not probable to narrate the story in the target language. Speaking is far demanding than listening and grasping the meaning is not enough to retell the story. While as Pinter (2008) states meaning focused input is crucial, it has also high importance to ensure production with language focus activities, though.

3. Age of acquisition

The age of acquisition is attached much importance and there has been a lot of controversy among researchers in second language acquisition probably because young learners have better performance in L2. The younger, the better constitutes the common ground in the debate. Many researches show the supremacy of young learners over older learners in language proficiency (e.g. Oyama, 1976, 1978; Patkowski, 1980; Krashen, et al., 1982; Felix, 1985, 1991; Singleton, 1989; Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Bley-Vroman, 1990; Johnson, 1992; Slavoff, & Johnson, 1995).

Long (1990) provides many evidences in his review on second language acquisition as to the necessity of early

acquisition. The study reveals that native-like proficiency in phonology is almost unachievable after 6 years old and there emerges allied problems in morphology and syntax after age 12. Therefore, it is claimed that there are some periods sensitive to language acquisition in different skills in order to reach complete proficiency (Haznedar&Uysal, 2010). However, despite the assertion of language acquisition loss after age 6, Long (1990) indicates the gradual decrease in language learning but not a single critical age for ultimate native-like proficiency. As Steven Pinker states, “acquisition... Is guaranteed for children up to the age of six, is steadily compromised from then until shortly after puberty, and is rare thereafter” (Pinker 1994:293), and similar acquisition process is also valid for second or foreign languages.

4. Studies on Teaching L2 to Very Young Learners

Studies on early language learning in language immersion schools in the North America bring out many evidence on teaching a second language to very young learners. Students are native speakers of English placed in French-speaking nursery and infant schools, and vice versa (Harley&Swain, 1984; Lightbown&Spada, 1994; Harley et al., 1995). Researches discover the advantages of early introduction of language on some language abilities but not all. Listening and pronunciation in general has better results for an earlier start while the latter also has longer term benefits. Despite an early start with young children, they are slow learners of L2 grammar compared to older learners so overall learning does not directly depend on the learning time (Harley et al., 1995). In addition, the time spent learning is unlikely to change the balance of benefits; therefore, receptive skills mostly precede productive skills and grammar in L2 acquisition as grammar needs to be cognitively ready (Cameron, 2001).

However, it is unlikely that the difference in quantity of language learning experience will affect the balance of benefits; in foreign language learning too, receptive skills are likely to remain ahead of productive skills, and grammatical knowledge, which is linked not just to language development but to cognitive development, is likely to develop more slowly for younger children (Cameron, 2001). Moreover, it has been reported that older learners make quick-start progress in the acquisition of L2 grammar and vocabulary as they are more cognitively mature (e. g. Harley & Wang, 1997). Related to the studies conducted, Long (1990) points out that the initial superiority of adults over younger learners has only short-term benefit, though.

According to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, pre-schoolers are in the preoperational stage of intelligence so learning can be boosted by helping them experience with concrete materials such as objects, pictures, stories, and videos (Morrison, 2003). Implications of preoperational stage on teaching need to be handled meticulously by professionals to promote learning. Hughes' research (1986) on children and number shows one of the best example of children's way of learning:

Hughes: How many is two and one more?
 Patrick (4): Four
 H: Well, how many is two lollipops and one more?
 P: Three
 H: How many is two elephants and one more?
 P: Three
 H: And two giraffes and one more?
 P: Three
 H: So, how many is two and one more?
 P: (Looking Hughes straight in the eye) Six (page 47)

5. Conclusion

This study concluded that children need hands-on activities to engage in their own learning. Concrete materials helps them understand and process the meaning. Teachers provide a range of activities to get young learners' attention and arouse constant interest. Physical activities such as walking, running, jumping, dancing and climbing contribute positively to learning when coordinated with language. It is also possible to make use of fine-motor activities such as drawing, colouring, painting, cutting, and pasting in classroom activities. In addition, age is the

important factor in language acquisition both in first language and foreign language. Studies show that early language acquisition is necessary to reach native like proficiency especially in pronunciation. While there is a consensus on the presence of critical period, it is pointed out that there is no single age but the ability to acquire a language decreases over time. Finally, researchers also find out that cognitive development affects the language acquisition process as well as language development. Therefore, older learners who are cognitively mature have faster start but it is only short term advantage over young learners. As a final note, further research is necessary on young learners' learning process and their learning styles. There is also a limited number of studies on future effects of early start in acquiring the foreign language rather than the second language. Future research should focus on age factor in proficiency of each skill and teaching very young learners a foreign language in accord with appropriate activities.

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