TEN PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

by Melanie Williams
Teaching English to young learners involves more than merely teaching the language. Both the social and cognitive development of learners, as well as the linguistic, need to be taken into account when planning for and working with the five to sixteen age group.

From my study of child development and the development of a first and second language in children, I have identified certain patterns and elements which seem to be central to all aspects of development. It is these I feel we need to be keep at the forefront of our minds when we teach English to young learners. In many ways these principles might appear to be common-sense and are what some teachers are already doing in their classrooms. In such cases the confirmation should be reassuring.

This global approach also ensures that we foster the development of the complete person, the whole child. For “…. language learning is now presented as being closely bound up with all the other learning that is going on”. (Donaldson 1978:38)
My Ten Principles are these:

Start where the child is

Children bring so much with them to the classroom that is often ignored or underestimated. They have experience of life, knowledge of their world, are good at making sense of what is around them and have already learnt at least one language. Quite an impressive record! In addition, they are usually enthusiastic and well-motivated. The stage of cognitive development will depend upon the age as well as the stimuli they have received to support and trigger that development. One area of difficulty which often arises for teachers occurs when the potential and abilities of the children are ignored and they are thought of as ‘empty vessels’. The other is when the tasks or activities set are not designed to be seen from a child's perspective, to make sense to the child, but from an adult’s perspective. This renders the task inaccessible to the child but does not show that the child is unable to do the task. The challenge for teachers is to stay in touch with their learners and set tasks at an appropriate level.

People excel in different ways. It has been shown that, rather than there being one type of ‘intelligence’ in fact there are many. Gardner (1983), has identified seven different, possibly overlapping intelligences: linguistic, logico-mathematical, visual/spatial, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, inter-personal and intra-personal. It is, therefore, important that work in the classroom is devised and constructed so that every child, whatever their intelligence strengths, can fully participate and make progress. In addition to the intelligence aspect(s), materials need to be an appropriate balance of the visual, auditory and kinaesthetic, channel(s) through which learners process input.

Depending on the level of meta-cognitive awareness, young learners may not be aware of language as a system: neither, for that matter, are all adults. Therefore, topics are used in the English language classroom to ‘carry’ and contextualise the target language. These topics should be meaningful, involving and interesting for learners, within their experience of life and conceptually accessible. For further discussion of the role of content, see Mohan (1986).

Encourage social interaction

Learning is an interactive process. Piaget, with reference to general development, holds that the quality and quantity of social interaction a child receives can markedly affect the rate of development. Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development (ZPD) emphasises the quality of interaction “…under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978:86). Scaffolding, Bruner’s interpretation of ZPD, is a metaphor to describe the
intervention by one ‘learned’ person in the learning of another. Halliday also supports the interactionist view: “As well as being a cognitive process, this learning of the mother tongue (and subsequent languages) is also an interactive process. It takes the form of the continued exchange of meanings between self and others,” (1975:139) (my addition in italics).

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), within with I would include Krashen’s Monitor Model and task-based approaches, has at its heart the importance of understanding and transmitting messages even more than the accuracy of the language which carries it.

**Learner exchange ideas and opinions as well as facts**

Meaning is neither constant nor is it fixed. It is renegotiated constantly by all of us in our dealings with each other. Vygotsky (1978) talks about a ‘tool kit of culture’ where the concepts and meanings the child acquires in the mother tongue arise from the culture by which the child is surrounded. Wells (1987) believes collaborative talk is key in helping children to shape and arrive at shared meanings and understandings. Fisher (1990) also emphasizes the importance of talk in the development of thinking, appearing to echo Vygotsky’s view that the process of transferring ideas into language plays an important part in stimulating overall development.

“Knowledge has to be constructed afresh by each individual knower through an interaction between the evidence (which is obtained through observation, listening, reading, and the use of reference materials of all kinds) and what the learner can bring to bear on it.” (Wells 1987:116)

Within CLT, the use of authentic, real-life (type) tasks in which learners exchange ideas and work together to solve problems and arrive at agreed outcomes, gives scope for collaborative talk and negotiation of meaning. Clearly, all learners need to be working with ideas and opinions not merely facts, for the talk to be meaningful and motivating. Prabhu identifies three task types: information-gap, reasoning-gap and opinion-gap and observes ‘overall it was reasoning-gap activity which proved to be the most satisfying in the classroom’ (1987:47).

**Learners are encouraged to think and contribute**

“The child’s task is to construct a system of meanings that represent his own model of social reality. This process takes place within his own head; it is a cognitive process. But it takes place in contexts of social interaction, and there is no way it can take place except in these contexts”. (Halliday 1975:139)
Learning is an active, cognitive process. No longer are learners seen as vessels waiting to be filled but as explorers actively working on language and ideas. As mentioned above, children bring so much with them to the classroom which can be used as building blocks for the new. Barnes describes the central contention of constructivism thus: “Each of us can only learn by making sense of what happens to us, through actively constructing a world for ourselves” (Norman 1992:123). For further discussion of constructivism see Williams and Burden (1997). Fisher (1990) argues for a focus on problem solving to stimulate thinking and to enable the child to be actively working on discovering meanings and answers.

For children to be cognitively active participants in this learning process, they need to encounter challenges and take risks. Learners who are not sufficiently challenged and are given and/or take no risks will never become independent and in some cases will fail to progress and become demotivated. However, clearly these challenges need to be adequately scaffolded and within the ZPD.

This active involvement in learning is also evident in relation to a second language: “A task-based approach sees the learning process as one of learning through doing - it is by primarily engaging in meaning that the learner’s system is encouraged to develop.” (Skehan in Willis & Willis 1996:20)

**Activities are cognitively and linguistically challenging**

Krashen (1982) has comprehensible input (I + 1 = input plus one) as key in the learning process because this ‘gap’ stimulates and challenges learners to develop their language further whilst the message remains understandable and accessible. There are echoes here of Vygotsky’s ZPD and Bruner’s scaffolding, where adult or peer support and input at a level just beyond that of the learner is held to be central to the child’s development. All too often in young learner as well as adult classrooms, learners are fed a diet of oversimplified language pitched at their level without account being taken of the need for exposure to language in a wider context. This links to the point above in relation to the importance of challenges and risks. If language input is always at the learners’ present linguistic level, there will be no opportunities for challenge and risk, both essential components for successful learning.

**Language is in appropriate contexts**

There is much discussion as to how a foreign language is learned. The tendency has been to break language down into discrete items - traditionally struc-
tures or functions - and to teach these to learners bit by bit. Learners are then expected to put the puzzle together again. However, children do not appear to do this when learning their mother tongue. They are exposed to a wide range of language and from this assimilate and use chunks of language, working out the structure at a deeper, sub-conscious level. Lewis (1993) suggests that foreign language teaching might also be looked at from the perspective of “multiword chunks”, developing learners’ ability to “chunk successfully”. Tough (Brumfit 1991) discusses the role of formulaic speech in the classroom, where the teacher is ready to reformulate and fill out the child’s talk with alternative utterances, much as parents do in the home.

All too often, in young learner as well as adult classrooms, learners are restricted to a diet of ‘predigested’ language operating only at sentence level. Rather than simplifying the process for learners, I believe this complicates it by specifying a structured learning path for all to follow regardless of learning styles, preferences, abilities and where learners are in their general and linguistic development. In young learner classrooms, stories, songs and plays are examples of how learners can be exposed to comprehensible, meaningful language at discourse level.

**Activities are meaningful and purposeful for learners**

Children learning their first language do not chose the contexts: these are part of their daily lives. They bring what knowledge they have to the situation and build from the known to the new, adjusting schemata constantly through ‘accommodation’ and ‘assimilation’. In the English classroom too, children need to be working within clear, familiar contexts and for the interaction to be meaningful and purposeful to them. They need to know why they are doing something and for the answer to the why to make sense to them. Again it is a question of the teacher’s ability to access and assess the children’s level (of interest and understanding) and to select topics and tasks accordingly.

**Activities help learners to develop independence**

It is natural for young learners to be dependent on their teachers. However, if learners are to become active participants in the learning process creating their own understandings and meanings, it is important that activities are designed and sequenced to support and foster growing independence. In young learner classrooms for example, this would include the staged introduction of pair and group work and the use of dictionaries and reference materials.
Learning environment is supportive, non-threatening and enjoyable

For learning to be successful learners need to feel secure, for parameters to be clear and for the learning to be enjoyable. Some of the factors which I believe engender a positive atmosphere in the classroom are these. All learners are valued as individuals; challenges and risks are supported; topics are relevant and interesting; activities are meaningful and purposeful; praise is given where and when it is due; discipline is firm, consistent and fair. As well as having a positive effect on the learning environment in the classroom, this approach will also encourage learners to be more tolerant of each other and others they encounter outside the classroom.

Assessment should reflect teaching

If we take the above nine points to be key to successful learning, then it is essential that the ways in which learners are assessed in the classroom mirrors and complements these. Sadly, this is not always the case, assessment processes and procedures often being excluded when teaching programmes are developed and reviewed.

Conclusion

It is clear that the ten principles I have identified are not discrete. There is much overlap between them. However, what emerges is the importance of taking account of the development of the whole person when planning for and teaching English to young learners because only by doing this can we ensure that the optimum environment and circumstances for successful learning are created.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


