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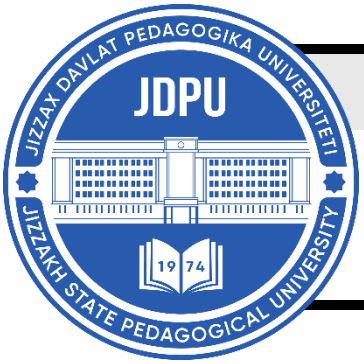

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PSYCHOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN YOUNG LEARNERS

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: Effective teaching of young learners promotes innate language acquisition mechanisms by providing children opportunities to use language as a tool for creating and sharing meanings and by scaffolding experiences to help children function “at the growing edge”. Effective teaching, therefore, involves authentic communication between learner and teacher and among learners, and is activity-based, providing purposeful ways for students to use language to meet age appropriate goals. Using language goals from one age group for learners at earlier ages may not serve any benefit, but instead may cause learners to miss important opportunities to accomplish developmental milestones for their stage of development.

INTRODUCTION

In the world international barriers break down and people can easily contact with other cultures and languages through travel, communication and technology. This is called globalization. Using English as a world language is the growing trend, English has introduced many children in many countries all over the world. Governments (economic benefits), Parents (economic, cultural, or educational advantages), Folk belief (younger children learn language better and more easily than older children), Educationalists have recognized need for English language learning at primary level and doing whatever they can to promote it. On different parts of the world English language learning becomes popular. Parents want their children to learn English at primary level. Many activities were organized to raise the profile of foreign language learning.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Teachers should:

1. **Offer learners enjoyable, active roles in the learning experience.**

Young learners are meaning-seekers who learn best by doing and who prefer a safe, but still challenging learning environment. We must provide language input and modelling for young language learners in any language environment, but particularly in an EFL setting where the teacher and the materials are the primary source of language. Yet, the input must be provided in child-appropriate ways.

Direct teaching in the full group for large portions of instructional time is being strongly encouraged by educational leaders. Direct instruction methodologies

and content intended for older learners are being pushed down to classes of younger learners based on the idea that introducing them sooner will make learning more effective. But young children learn differently and need different learning environments. Overuse of direct teaching of young learners in the full classroom group risks the fallacy that "input" will automatically lead to "intake" – that if we teach something, it has been learned. But for young children, active involvement in

the construction of concepts is essential. We must provide input in child appropriate

ways and offer many opportunities for children to use language purposefully as language develops. For example, once we have modelled language and procedures for water experiments about things that float and things that sink, or which container holds more water, we can provide opportunities on the playground for children to experiment with water and use the language in discussions. We scaffold by asking questions and making comments as children participate in their very purposeful play and learning tasks.

2. **Help students develop and practice language through collaboration.**

Children are social learners. While ensuring that students have access to vocabulary and structures they need—and rich exposure to many kinds of literature is a very effective way to model high quality, academic language—and then supporting their language as needed, we provide opportunities for learners to communicate with us and with one another. During the water explorations, for example, one child could be encouraged to conduct the experiments while others give instructions and ask questions about what they see happening.

3. **Use multi-dimensional, thematically organized activities.**

Provide thematically organized activities and incorporate multiple dimensions of learning and learning styles appropriate to younger learners. Thematic organization offers us opportunities to cycle and recycle related language and concepts so that we can support children as they develop the complex connections that lead to learning. We need to incorporate many kinds of child-development appropriate activities into children's exploration of themes. We might move like waves on the sea,

sing songs about sailing on the ocean. We draw pictures of our experiments or our favorite water creatures, weigh and measure water, solve problems about sharing lemonade, read and reflect on a story about a mother duck temporarily losing one of her little ones and with children write reports about what we are learning and thinking about.

4. **Provide comprehensible input with scaffolding.**

Provide rich yet comprehensible input with supportive scaffolding from teacher, context, and peers to help learners work providing tasks and concepts that children can accomplish or acquire with just a little instruction and support. When children can perform these tasks independently, the growing edge changes or expands, and teachers then support learners with slightly more difficult tasks and concepts. Since teachers must continually focus on providing input and requests for output that children will need to perform at the next level, they must use careful observation and classroom-based assessment to know their children's capabilities well. Scaffolding activities for reading and writing might include reading a story aloud, providing graphic organizers to help children understand and discuss the language patterns and structure of a story, and shared writing with children from the graphic organizer. Following are two graphic organizers that teach about text structure. The first shows a line story about what happens when an old woman swallows various animals. The teacher or a student can point to the creature they're singing about and help children learn the pattern. The second story shows the pattern of a circle story, one that ends up where it begins.

5. **Integrate language with content.**

Teaching language for age-appropriate academic content has several advantages. Students learning two languages in school in a bilingual setting curriculum can be integrated across languages, so that the children in L2 (second-language) classrooms encounter the same concepts that they do in L1 (first language) classrooms but with new labels, both reinforcing the content-area learning and facilitating the new language learning because it is based on what children already know. In a L2 setting, teaching language through content means that students' academic learning is not delayed while they learn language.

Rather, they have the opportunity to learn language in age-appropriate, stage appropriate activities that will prepare them for grade-level academic content.

6. **Validate and integrate home language and culture.**

Continued development of children's home language will only support development of a new language. Another misunderstanding of how language develops that is common outside linguistic and language educational circles is that a first language can hinder or interfere with a second. Rather, students with good academic learning in their first language are clearly at an advantage when they begin to learn additional languages.

When a child “breaks the code” or “joins the literacy club” and understands the basic concepts of reading in one language, this does not need to be re-learned in the target language. Rather, students now need to learn only new words, new sounds, and new written codes – no small task, but a much easier one than learning to read in a new language when a child doesn’t have literacy concepts.

As language educators, we can help young learners use their knowledge and learning experiences of their home language to expand their learning in a second language. Acquiring a new language should clearly be an additive process and should never necessitate losing one’s mother tongue.

7. **Provide clear goals and feedback on performance.**

Children want to do right. They need to know when they’ve achieved a goal and when they still have more to learn. We must establish clear language and content goals for learners and provide learners with feedback on their progress toward those goals. We can also, in developmentally appropriate ways, encourage learners to begin to evaluate their own progress toward accomplishing goals to help them become independent, self motivated learners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In spite of the sophistication of our research techniques, the speed of our computers, and the years of thought and study we have put into understanding children’s development, it is a long, long road to such understanding—a road along which we educators of young learners of English are still taking baby steps. This paper is a modest effort to bring together classic thought in the field of early childhood cognitive and language development, recent work examining how children’s brains operate as they develop cognition and language, and recommendations for how we can organize and conduct learning experiences to put the best of what we know to work. Our goal is to help children to grow and develop in happy, healthy, richly multilingual ways.

Principles of language learning

Before evaluating language learning materials in terms of their ability to promote learning it is necessary to have a set of principles about how languages are learned. Cameron writes that the following have emerged as the most important principles in thinking about foreign language learning by young learners:

- Children actively try to construct meaning
- Children need space for language growth
- Language in use carries cues to meaning that may not be noticed
- Development can be seen as internalising from social interaction
- Children’s foreign language learning depends on what they experience

Approaches to teaching young learners based on such principles include Cameron’s learning-centred approach and Paul’s child-centred approach.

Characteristics of young learners

According to Biehler and Snowman children posses these characteristics:

- children are full of energy, very active, need a constant change of activities
- therefore should not work by their desks for too long, they need movement;
- the need of breaks (change of exhausting and quiet activities); children get easily tired and need time to absorb new energy;
- fine motor skills are not fully developed: pupils can not be writing for too long;
- the sight of children can be easily overburden therefore the materials should be
- written in appropriate size and we can not force pupils to look into distance for
- too long;
- we should try to avoid rash and careless activities (children tense to move in a
- very fast way and they are very often too confident in managing the movement
- skill);
- children are picky in choosing their “best-friends“: try to teach them to cooperate with each other;
- games are fun and the rules of the games should be kept and understood by every single child;
- use criticism in a very cautious way, children are very sensitive to it; the need to feel the success and the feeling of recognition;
- young learners worship their teachers ;
- especially during the first grades at school, children are longing to learn, they are already motivated for learning;
- they prefer talking than writing, reciting, acting;

Scott and Ytreberg stress another characteristics of a young learner (aged eight to ten years):

- they want to learn as much as possible, they constantly ask;
- they start to be responsible for themselves;
- they know what they want to do or what they do not want to do;
- they want to "play fair " and they want their teacher to make the fair decisions
- they like to work in groups;
- their mother tongue is fully equipped – they can think in an abstract way, they understand symbols, they can make up their minds on what is wrong or wright or what is true or fiction;
- the highest time when children form their thinking style is at the age of seven or eight, from that point they can understand the adults world in a better way;

The British philosopher John Stuart Mill started to learn Greek at the age of three. Clearly, John Stuart Mill was not an average child. What we are talking about in the lessons of this subject is the

average child. This subject assumes that pupils are between five and ten or eleven years old. This means that the subject covers some of the most vital years in a child's development. All education, including learning a foreign language, should contribute positively to that development.

There is a big difference between what children of five can do and what children of ten can do. Some children develop early, some later. Some children develop gradually, others in leaps and bounds. It is not possible to say that at the age of five all children can do x, at the age of seven they can all do y, or that at the age of ten they can all do. But it is possible to point out certain characteristics of young children which you should be aware of and take into account in your teaching. You, as the teacher, are the only one who can see how far up the ladder your individual pupils are. We can only draw your attention to the characteristics of the average child which are relevant for language teaching.

We have divided the children into two main groups throughout the subject - the five to seven year olds and the eight to ten year olds. We are assuming that the five to seven year olds are all at level one, the beginner stage. The eight to ten year olds may also be beginners, or they may have been learning the foreign language for some time, so there are both level one and level two pupils in the eight to ten age group.

Five to seven year olds

What five to seven year olds can do at their own level:

- They can talk about what they are doing.
- They can tell you about what they have done or heard.
- They can plan activities.
- They can argue for something and tell you why they think what they think.
- They can use logical reasoning.
- They can use their vivid imaginations.
- They can use a wide range of intonation patterns in their mother tongue.
- They can understand direct human interaction.

Other characteristics of the young language learner

- They know that the world is governed by rules. They may not always understand the rules, but they know that they are there to be obeyed, and the rules help to nurture a feeling of security.
- They understand situations more quickly than they understand the language used.
- They use language skills long before they are aware of them.
- Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times.
- They are very logical - what you say first happens first. 'Before you turn off the light, put your book away' can mean 1 Turn off the light and then 2 put your book away.

- They have a very short attention and concentration span.

Young children are often happy playing and working alone but in the company of others they can be very reluctant to share. It is often said that children are very self-centred up to the age of six or seven and they cannot see things from someone else's point of view. This may well be true, but do remember that sometimes pupils don't want to work together because they don't see the point. They don't always understand what we want them to do.

The adult world and the child's world are not the same. Children do not always understand what adults are talking about. Adults do not always understand what children are talking about. The difference is that adults usually find out by asking questions, but children don't always ask. They either pretend to understand, or they understand in their own terms and do what they think you want them to do.

They will seldom admit that they don't know something either. A visiting friend took a confident five year old to school one day after the child had been going to school for three weeks. It was only when they arrived at a senior boys' school after forty-five minutes that the visitor realised that the child had no idea where she was. Her mother had asked her several times before she left home if she knew the way, the visitor had asked the same question several times in the forty-five minutes. The child had answered cheerfully and confidently that she knew the way to her school very well!

- Young children cannot decide for themselves what to learn.
- Young children love to play, and learn best when they are enjoying themselves. But they also take themselves seriously and like to think that what they are doing is 'real' work.
- Young children are enthusiastic and positive about learning. We all thrive on doing well and being praised for what we do, and this is especially true for young children. It is important to praise them if they are to keep their enthusiasm and feel successful from the beginning. If we label children failures, then they, believe us.

Eight to ten year olds

Children of five are little children. Children of ten are relatively mature children with an adult side and a childish side. Many of the characteristics listed above will be things of the past.,

- Their basic concepts are formed. They have very decided views of the world.
- They can tell the difference between fact and fiction.
- They ask questions all the time.
- They rely on the spoken word as well as the physical world to convey and understand meaning.
- They are able to make some decisions about their own learning.
- They have definite views about what they like and don't like doing.

- They have a developed sense of fairness about what happens in the classroom and begin to question the teacher's decisions.
- They are able to work with others and learn from others.

Language development

Eight to ten year olds have a language with all the basic elements in place. They are competent users of their mother tongue and in this connection they are aware of the main rules of syntax in their own language. By the age of ten children can:

- understand abstracts
- understand symbols (beginning with words)
- generalise and systematise.

This refers to children's general language development. When it comes to learning a foreign language, there is still a lot we do not know. There are many similarities between learning one's mother tongue and learning a foreign language in spite of the differences in age and the time available. So far nobody has found a universal pattern of language learning which everyone agrees with. Much seems to depend on which mother tongue the pupils speak and on social and emotional factors in the child's background. What is clear here is that most eight to ten year olds will have some sort of language awareness and readiness which they bring with them into the foreign language classroom.

The period from five to ten sees dramatic changes in children, but we cannot say exactly when this happens because it is different for all individuals. The magic age seems to be around seven or eight. At around seven or eight, things seem to fall into place for most children and they begin to make sense of the adult world as we see it.

Think about young children telling jokes. Five year olds laugh because everybody else does, but they don't always understand the joke. If they are asked to re-tell the joke it will be nonsense. Seven year olds think jokes are funny and they learn them off by heart. This means that they often get the punch line wrong or have to be prompted. Ten and eleven year olds remember jokes and can work out the punch line from the situation. The system of language and the understanding of it seems to fall into place for many children in the same way.

What this means for our teaching Words are not enough.

Don't rely on the spoken word only. Most activities for the younger learners should include movement and involve the senses. You will need to have plenty of objects and pictures to work with, and to make full use of the school and your surroundings. Demonstrate what you want them to do. The balance will change as the children get older, but appealing to the senses will always help the pupils to learn.

Play with the language

Let the pupils talk to themselves. Make up rhymes, sing songs, tell stories. Play with the language - let them talk nonsense, experiment with words and sounds: 'Let's go - pets go.' 'Blue eyes - blue pies.' Playing with the language in this way is very common in first language development and is a very natural stage in the first stages of foreign language learning too.

Language as language

Becoming aware of language as something separate from the events taking place takes time. Most eight to ten year olds already have this awareness in their own language. The spoken word is often accompanied by other clues to meaning - facial expression, movement, etc. We should make full use of these clues. When pupils start to read, the language becomes something permanent and there are fewer other clues to meaning. Pupils can take a book home, they can read it again and again, they can stop, think about the language and work it out. The same is true of writing. So reading and writing are extremely important for the child's growing awareness of language and for their own growth in the language, although both are very demanding and take time and patience to learn.

Children benefit from knowing the rules and being familiar with the situation. Have systems, have routines, organise and plan your lessons. Use familiar situations, familiar activities. Repeat stories, rhymes, etc. Cooperation not competition

Avoid rewards and prizes. Other forms of encouragement are much more effective. Make room for shared experiences - they are an invaluable source of language work and create an atmosphere of involvement and togetherness. Most of us enjoy the feeling of belonging and this is particularly true of young children. Group the children together whenever possible. This does not mean that they have to work in groups all the time, but most children like to have other children around them, and sitting with others encourages cooperation. Genuine cooperative pairwork and groupwork is usually the result of a long process. Some pupils work best alone. Children have an amazing ability to absorb language through play and other activities which they find enjoyable. How good they are in a foreign language is not dependent on whether they have learnt the grammar rules or not. Very few of your pupils will be able to cope with grammar as such, even at the age of ten or eleven. They may be very aware and clear about the foreign language, but they are not usually mature enough to talk about it.

CONCLUSION

As a teacher, you should note the structures, functions and grammar items which you want your pupils to learn as well as those they already know, but your actual teaching should only include the barest minimum of grammar taught as grammar, and then for the older children only. This does not mean teaching grammar rules to the whole class. The best time to introduce some sort of simple grammar is either when a pupil asks for an explanation, or when you think a pupil will benefit from learning some grammar. This may be when you are correcting written work, or it may be in connection with an oral exercise which practises, for example, 'Did she . . .?' and 'Does she . . .?' Older

pupils, especially those at level two, may ask exactly what the difference is between 'did' and 'does', since both are used for questions, and you can then use the opportunity to explain the difference in simple terms. You might want to use the terms 'a yesterday question' and 'a today question'. It might or might not be appropriate to compare what happens in the mother tongue in the same situation. What is important is that the explanations should be given on an individual/group basis when the pupils themselves are asking the questions, that the explanations are kept as simple as possible, and that the pupils are able to grasp the point and so benefit from the explanation.

Even though formal assessment may not be a compulsory part of your work, it is always useful for the teacher to make regular notes about each child's progress. You may want to tell parents how their children are doing, and you should be talking to the children regularly about their work and encouraging self-assessment. From the beginning this can be done in very simple terms, stressing the positive side of things and playing down what the pupil has not been able to master. Nothing succeeds like success.

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