

## The activity-based approach: Searching for methodological alternatives to help children learn English

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*“A child is a world in constant expansion. To grow up as an integral individual able to respond to the demands of this changing society, s/he has to be accompanied by a prepared, experienced and caring guide who recognizes the potential that is waiting to be developed.”*

One of the most common complaints heard from students after they graduate and start working is that they do not feel prepared to teach English. This is an obvious comment, especially if the legal situation of English teaching in Colombia is analyzed.

It is known that only until the expedition of the “Ley 115 de 1994” (General Law of Education) the teaching of English as a foreign language had to be included in the curriculum of pre-school (first level of formal education) and Elementary school. The objective of this modification is to “respond to the necessities of a multicultural world” (Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Languages, 1999).

Nevertheless, and as Rojas Bernal (1998) affirms, it is only until 1993 that Universities started to offer, in a superficial manner, graduate studies in the area of teaching in Primary School.

As a consequence, many teachers of high school are trying to adapt to the necessity of teaching English to children without having an appropriate theoretical background on the cognitive processes they go through.

Hence, the conclusion drawn from analysis and experience is that teacher preparation in the last decades has been centered on EFL methodology and techniques designed to teach basically teenagers or adults and that very little has been recently said about EFL for children.

According to Scott and Ytreberg (1995), all of this makes us realize that general EFL teacher-training courses may not always be relevant to the teaching of children because such a practice requires a solid theoretical framework, methods and approaches (traditional or modern ones) as well as a good dose of experience, to succeed and have children succeed in English at an early age.

It is likely that the low knowledge students reveal in high school and even in the University in the programs of foreign languages derives from the inadequate preparation of teachers. If we are careful with what we teach to our children and the way we teach it, we can be sure that problems of lack of interest and motivation or language mastering at later stages will be avoided.

It is also essential to give further support and guidance to teachers who are teaching children for the first time.

When working with children the teaching approach is necessarily different. Due to the special needs and characteristics children have (curiosity, short attention span, and need of physical activity, to mention some of them), it is deemed convenient for the teacher to know about the different methods, approaches and techniques in order to have enough sources to recur to when children have used up his/her teaching strategies.

There are several methods and approaches from EFL advisable to teach English to children. We have all heard about the Communicative Approach, the TPR method, the Whole Language Approach, the Natural Approach or the content-based approach. And we all know that we may make use of one or some of them according to what we are to teach. Those who have worked with children may agree that even if they know many approaches and techniques it is always useful to learn or remember others that can be very helpful in class.

Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with an insight of the approach called Activity-Based Approach that has a lot to offer because it takes into account specific characteristics and needs of children.

Kilpatrick (1918), cited in the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Languages (1999), can be considered as one of its promoters. He argues that children learn by doing something that has a practical educational value for them. It is equally important in this approach the relation between the English class and the other subject matters

to the point that the process of learning/teaching does not necessarily take place in individual lessons but in different areas or subject matters that are integrated in topics. These topics are developed in an active way, generally through activities and research projects carried out by the students with the participative guidance of the teacher.

The following example, taken from Vale and Feunteun (1995) can help us understand the principles of this approach. Vale and Feunteun say that it makes little sense to ask children something like: Can you fly? if the purpose is to teach **can/can't**. It would be more interesting and profitable to give them a task such as to ask them to go to the garden and observe all the bugs there and then to classify them according to specific can/can't criteria (fly, walk, sting, etc.). The teacher can help students by creating an individual chart to record the information observed. Once the observation period has finished, a discussion session may follow. The purpose of the activity will be to encourage and support children to describe the results focusing on can/can't, using, of course, the language students have at their disposal depending on their level.

While the activity is taking place, and to make it really advantageous for the students, the teacher can put into practice the principles of the Communicative Approach which privileges the use of the foreign language as a basic element in communication through interaction. He can then expose the children to a very wide range of language by giving them easy and clear instructions, by making comments, and by describing things and situations related to the topic, bearing in mind at all moments the level of the students.

This kind of activity is likely to be carried out with children if we consider the fact that, as in their mother tongue, children do not learn structure by structure or a determined number of isolated words. As Halliwell (1998) states, children have an enormous ability to grasp meaning especially because words or structures are not uttered in an isolated way. On the contrary, intonation, gesture, facial expressions, actions and circumstances help to tell the children what the unknown words probably mean. By understanding the message in this way children start to understand language. Therefore, according to Scott and Ytreberg (1995) it is important to offer children a whole learning situation in which language development is an integral part of the learning taking place, and not the only end product.

So far we have referred to the Activity-Based Approach arguing that it might be useful for teachers who work with children because of the specific characteristics they undoubtedly have. Teachers who work with children should always keep in mind the following aspects:

## 1. CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS

Since our objective is not to be exhaustive but rather informative, it is important that a teacher of children be familiar with some of the characteristics of children and their language development to be able to apply a method, approach or technique to teach a language in an appropriate way.

With regard to the general characteristics of children, Halliwell (1998) mentions the following ones:

➤ *Children's ability to grasp meaning.* In their first language, children have the

ability to "read" messages and not words or sentences out of context. When they learn a foreign language they recur to this skill they already have, and it is useful to build on it.

➤ *Children's creative use of limited language resources.* In their mother tongue, even if they do not have a very wide vocabulary or grammatical structures, children manage to communicate by sometimes creating words or structures or by stretching their language resources to the limit. The same situation applies to children when they learn a foreign language.

➤ *Children's capacity for indirect learning or acquisition.* This characteristic has to do with the capacity that children have to learn more things than expected and not always the ones we had planned for them. That is why it is advisable to provide children who learn a foreign language with real language use through real tasks.

➤ *Children's imagination.* This is a fundamental element a teacher can base his work on because, even if children are busy making sense of the world, it is also true that imagining is an authentic part of being a child. Stimulating children's imagination can help both students and teacher to make the English class more profitable because children like to share their ideas.

➤ *Children's instinct for interaction and talk.* Children like talking and this is one of the characteristics they bring to the English classroom that teachers can build on making sure that the desire to talk is working for learning and not against it.

➤ *Children's instinct for playing and having fun.* Play does not have to be

considered as a waste of time. On the contrary, when children play they are in fact exploring their world and adding to their learning through real experimentation that has to be taken very seriously. Through their sense of fun and play, the children are living the language for real.

## 2. STUDENTS' NEEDS

According to Vale and Feunteun (1995) there is an enormous pressure on the teacher to produce observable results in any EFL classroom: on one hand, teachers feel responsible if new words or structures are not learned or produced in every class. On the other hand, parents always want to hear their children speaking English almost instantly. These facts become a potential hinderance for children since "silence" does not mean children are not learning. In the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Language (1999) the authors make reference to the "silence period". This period helps students to gain confidence in their knowledge through observation and constant exposure to the foreign language as they are associating sounds to actions and to meanings. When students feel ready, they generally start, the use of the spoken language spontaneously.

Consequently, it is compulsory that the teacher creates an atmosphere where children feel confident and their cognitive development be respected to assure their success. It is very easy to lead children to failure if they feel pressed by the teachers to show a perfect linguistic production at an early stage. They may lose confidence and interest and they may start thinking that English is too difficult for them to learn.

Conversely, in an activity-based environment, the objective is the successful

completion of a task in English. Consequently, most children will speak when they are ready to do so and specially when they have something they wish to talk about.

## 3. COPING WITH ERRORS AND CORRECTION

It has been said that children can be easily encouraged to fail if teachers focus attention on the accurate production of linguistic patterns. That accuracy will certainly arise naturally if students maintain a high motivation and a correct guidance.

It cannot be a different way, if we consider that the teacher settles down real activities that convey real communication, and as Halliwell (1992) states "real communication demands risk taking, especially when linguistic knowledge is still only half formed".

The same author asserts that without risks and mistakes we could not learn anything. Unfortunately, many teachers of children, and EFL teachers in general, have neglected this fact and have forgotten that the way they treat mistakes is not always the most adequate one.

Children perceive mistakes and failures as something rather frustrating more than humiliating. However, when they go to school, they give mistakes a negative connotation. Although constant, overcareful, overdetailed correction aims at children's perfect performance, we cannot forget that even native speakers come out with odd and ungrammatical things which do not hinder communication.

It is worthy to check if the children are getting English reasonably right but it is

more important at early stages of the language learning process to identify priorities for the child as a learner. They include providing children with the motivation to learn English by showing them that English is fun and useful, and to build up children's confidence to communicate with whatever language they have at their disposal (mime, gesture, keyword, drawings, etc). Let us remember that words are not the only means to communicate or to verify that something has been understood or learnt.

#### **4. THE AGE AND THE PACE OF LEARNING**

Hill (1991) reminds us that children have to be recognized as individuals who develop and learn according to their specific characteristics, needs and environmental circumstances. Not every child does the same things or knows exactly the same concepts other children of his/her age do. For this reason, teachers have no choice but to be in a constant search of strategies that fit their students' characteristics. Having a broad information on the different methodological proposals can help teachers deal with the changing learning pace of children.

Another advantage of the Activity-Based Approach is that it can be successfully used with children of all ages, and the tasks can be chosen from activities that are common throughout the primary school syllabus and that due to their importance can be considered useful to a specific class.

At this point, it is pertinent to clarify that this approach is not suggested to be used as the only possible method to teach English to children. For those who work with children it is good to count on as many

pedagogical resources as possible to have enough tools to give variety in class. That variety may well include a change of approach.

#### **5. THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER**

Teachers have to be aware of the influence they have on their students. Students, especially children, recognize in their teachers' patterns of behavior that consciously or unconsciously adopt to their own personality features. For this reason, teachers should think of their pedagogical task in several directions.

On one hand, they should consider their specific knowledge because they are the ones who provide children with the necessary "input" in the foreign language required to build a communicative competence. Teachers should also have appropriate and updated pedagogical background since no pragmatic knowledge can be supported without the corresponding theoretical framework.

On the other hand, the specific knowledge cannot be transferred if there is not an appropriate selection of the methodology but especially if teachers neglect the role of the affective aspects involved in teaching.

We need to recognize that teachers who work with children need to have particular characteristics: first of all, they have to enjoy working with children and understand their development, needs, and interests. Also, they have to be able to establish a good working relationship with children in order to help them grow as integral individuals. Finally, and most importantly, they have to be aware that their role is not only that of a teacher but also that of a parent, a motivator, a coordinator and above all a friend who

children can count on.

## 6. ASSESSMENT

In agreement with the characteristics of the Activity-Based Approach that appears in the Curricular Guidelines for Foreign Languages (1999) about assessment, since this approach favors the learning through development and accomplishment of activities, assessment gives equal value to the processes as well as to the product. This balance originates in the belief that an enthusiastic, serious, responsible and correctly guided process must result in a product with similar characteristics and value.

In general terms, Scott and Ytreberg (1995), recommend a constant monitoring of the children's progress. It would be very useful to involve parents in the process of educating, sharing with them the results of their children's performance. It is also suggested to talk to the children regularly about their work and to foment self-assessment. This can be done from the beginning stressing the positive aspects of the learning process instead of emphasizing the weaknesses because this undermines the children's confidence to keep on learning.

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