

Teaching English to Children: Conclusions on a Study

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The English teaching and learning process is a topic of great importance now in Colombia. Primary schools are implementing English as a Foreign Language in their curriculum. In different seminars Teaching English to children has been discussed, and a great deal of uncertainty can be observed in primary school English teachers. They are unsure on how to approach the teaching of a foreign language to children since they have been trained on how to teach English to high school students. Parents complain that children do not like English and they argue that it is the fault of the English teachers. In the Nariño University at Pasto, an experience on this topic has taken place. Thirty children between 6 and 10 years of age are attending English classes. These students receive 10 hours of instruction per week. These 30 students are divided into 2 groups and have already approved five levels of English, each level lasting one semester.

The methodology used in classes is mostly communicative. Students listen and speak English during the whole class time. TPR principles are also applied in these classes. Gamelike situations, as the ones proposed by TPR and Communicative approaches motivate students, reduce stress, and facilitate learning (Richards and Rodgers, 1986).

The five levels of English instruction were developed in the following way. The first level was based on the assumption that an L2 follows a process of learning that is equivalent to the one followed in L1

learning (Asher, 1976); therefore, children were faced with listening tasks in English and were not asked to respond orally until they were ready to do so. After two periods of class (four hours), the students started producing oral language in a comfortably way. It is also important to mention that in the first level students were not asked to write the foreign language. They just participated actively in an oral way. The second level of English instruction was based on the assumption that students had already acquired some English. They understood what they listened to in English and they needed to improve their knowledge of the L2. To supply this need, the $i + 1$ formula was applied. Krashen (1989) argues that in L2 acquisition, it is important for learners to be faced with input that is a little beyond their level of knowledge. Therefore, children were given different kinds of input in activities such as games, songs, and films. At the end of this second level students were introduced to the reading and writing processes. It is outstanding to notice that students started writing in a very sure and comfortable manner. Apart from a very few spelling mistakes, their writing was clear and understandable.

At the third level students were faced with more writing tasks in the form of games and puzzles. Students were introduced to copying short phrases too. The oral practice was always emphasized and listening comprehension developed. Reading was developed at this stage with short texts that facilitated comprehension.

In the fourth and fifth levels students were faced with more reading comprehension exercises. Writing improved with the help of reading texts. Some phrase building exercises were also introduced. The oral and listening comprehension were maintained as the main skills in the course.

The role of the teachers was mostly to provide opportunities for children to learn the L2 in a variety of activities and with a variety of materials. It is necessary to mention that a textbook was chosen and complemented with pictures, cards, cassettes and videos. The design of materials related to the students' environment to facilitate the comprehension process in children was also needed.

The study concluded this last semester and the results obtained are satisfactory. All of the children entered without any knowledge of English and have finished the fifth level of the course having achieved a knowledge of English we have categorized as low intermediate.

What is important from this study is that we could test some of the assumptions given by authors who have developed studies on ESL for children. Some of these assumptions take place in EFL for children. Some of these assumptions take place in EFL for children too with some slight changes. From our experience we also concluded about aspects needed to be considered in teaching English to children at Primary schools in Colombia.

CONCLUSIONS ON THE STUDY

In this section some conclusions drawn from this study are presented.

1. *Children learn English easily but also acquire it.*

During the five levels of our research, it was possible to notice that children learn English easily. The brain lateralization theory gives us a clue to this respect. Children have plasticity in the brain. This plasticity helps them to speed up the process of FLL which slows down and finishes around puberty (Lamendella, 1979).

Another support to this conclusion is given by what Chastain (1971) assumes. He argues that children seem to learn the new language easily, perhaps because they are not worried about vocabulary correction as adults are. In our experience it is possible to observe how children pay more attention to the communicative process, so that they acquire new language through a series of non very attached linguistic habits. For children, language is an instrument not a topic of critical attention.

2. *Children are easy to motivate and above all they need action to be motivated.*

In a children's class, it is possible to observe that movement maintains the attention of students. As Asher (1976) argues, understanding and retention are best achieved through movements of the student bodies in response to commands. The imperative of language is powerful too because it can be used to manipulate students' behaviour and guide them towards understanding through actions. The majority of our classes focus not only on the use of TPR responses but also on the use of games and activities that demand action from children. The response of our children to these activities was great and language acquisition took place when they

liked the kind of activity presented.

3. *Children enjoy changing activities almost every fifteen minutes, otherwise they will feel tired, stressed and anxious.*

Variety is very important in language classes, even more, if we are working with children. The absence of stress is really an important condition to succeed in language learning. If we give children the possibility to learn the foreign language in a similar way as they acquired their first language, they will be involved in a stress-free atmosphere without anxiety. To achieve this atmosphere, the teacher has to come back to the natural bio-program of language development and also to relaxed and pleasurable experiences such as those that accompany first language acquisition. It is necessary to remember that stress intervenes between the act of learning in what is to be learned, the lower the stress, the greater the learning.

4. *Children do not care about any kind of exercises the teacher asks them to do.*

Our experience tested this conclusion. Children developed all of the exercises the teachers asked them to develop in English classes. In oral activities it was required from them to see, they developed those activities spontaneously. If they were asked to mimic they enjoyed doing it. Children's self confidence, low anxiety, self confidence, and motivation predict success in their second language acquisition process. Krashen (1989) assumes that learners with a good self-image and motivation interact more and obtain more input for acquisition. Therefore, it is possible to say that the affective filter of children is low and this permits them to

interact in different ways in a language class.

5. *If children are motivated they do not protest about the time they have to spend in class.*

Motivation plays a very important role in foreign language learning. It is necessary to create an environment of confidence, achievement, acceptance, sincerity, praise in teaching English to children. Classroom activities should be varied, pleasant, and amusing to maintain children's attention. During the study our groups had a complete afternoon of English class. It was interesting to observe that they really liked to attend more the day of the week in which a whole afternoon was devoted to learning English.

6. *Children like to play, sing, dance, and dramatize.*

Among different activities developed in class, it was outstanding to observe that children enjoyed playing, singing, dancing and dramatizing more than other activities. It is possible to conclude here, that activities that focus on authentic speech situations in which two or more students are involved motivate children to a great extent. Dialogues, songs, and games should be preferably short and built around a cultural situation, thus only the patterns used in real conversation should be presented. It is also possible to conclude that the new patterns of language should be introduced by means of the vocabulary known by children and expand it once they have understood a situation.

7. *Children like to watch TV.*

This sentence is true about watching T.V. in first language programs. The doubt was

if it would also happen when children are faced with L2 programs in which no Spanish word was used. Since T.V. programs in English are a very good way to develop listening comprehension with the help of image, this activity was introduced from the beginning of the course in a progressive way during the whole course. The first time children watched a five minute presentation, then a ten minute presentation and so on. Children enjoy watching T.V. programs in the L2. It is necessary to consider here that T.V. is effective only when it is used judiciously. Children have to be prepared for the T.V. program or lesson they will watch. The teacher has to give them a brief explanation in the foreign language for what they are going to see and hear. It is also important to develop reinforcement and follow-up activities.

8. *Children learn easily when they use all of the senses in class activities.*

The more senses involved in a learning process, the more learning achieved. Children need a variety of activities to be motivated when learning the L2. In this variety of activities, it is also necessary to involve a variety of senses. Stephen (1981) points out that children when learning an L2 are not only deeply involved in the process of learning language, but also having a good time doing it. Activities such as cutting, gluing, touching, smelling, seeing, listening, and speaking involve all of the senses and give variety to the classes.

9. *Children learn by means of doing things with language.*

For children, English is not a subject of study, it is a way of doing things. Stephen (1981) argues that children love to make things with language. They like to play with

words, make rhymes, listen to and tell stories, role play and sing. Language is the expression of thoughts, feelings, values, and experiences of a community, therefore, children should learn to appreciate the customs of children in other countries; they should know that there are other ways of communicating which permit them to express the same ideas, the same likes and dislikes, the same needs and desires as in their native language.

10. *Children learn easier in a natural environment. Children learn when materials reflect what they already know or have experienced in life. Therefore, previous knowledge of the world is important when trying to teach a foreign language.*

Here, the natural environment refers to all of the things that surround children's life. The previous knowledge a child has about aspects of life helps to present the new language in an understandable way for children. If the teacher uses the environment in which a child lives to be expressed in English, the child will relate English as a means to expressing what happens to him/her in his/her daily life activities. Therefore, the activities developed in class should be related to those they do in real life at that age. According to Finocchiaro (1964) children should feel that the foreign language is a functional means of communication and not a school exercise.

11. *Children give feedback quickly.*

Our experience in the study was that it is easy to observe how students react to the teaching process in a very quick way. Children show like or dislike at the moment the teacher presents a specific activity. They also show how much they

understand since they like to start using the new language right at the moment it is understood. If a child is not using the language it means comprehension has not taken place. Children are sincere and tell the teacher anything they want to say with respect to the class, right at the moment in which things happen.

- 1. Children make few mistakes. Most of the mistakes they commit are those induced by the teacher, therefore, the teacher needs to have a responsible preparation.***

It is impossible not making mistakes but it is interesting how children when faced with a good language model commit very few mistakes when they use the language. Children during the study were able to handle language as it was presented. The structures of language used in communication were well formed and pronunciation was very clear. It was possible also to notice that when they committed a pronunciation or structural mistake it was because of faulty teaching. The preparation of the English teacher for children classes should be the best if we want our students to succeed in the English learning process.

- 2. Children learn first to speak the language, therefore the teacher should not ask them to write or read from the beginning.***

According to Finocchiaro (1964), the language skills are presented and practiced in the following order: listening, speaking, reading and writing. This order is the same as the one followed by any child learning the mother tongue. With listening exercises children become familiar with the sounds, rhythm, intonation of the language and some of its basic structures. Children learn

to read and write once they have familiarity with the oral production of the foreign language. Once children know some language and are faced with writing and reading exercises, they are able to do them. They read spontaneously and do not have many spelling mistakes if faced with writing activities after different reading exercises have been developed.

- 3. Students enjoy working on the floor and changing the traditional arrangement of chairs in the classroom.***

Maybe it is because of a change in the rigid norm Colombian schools have about sitting in rows and working always in the desk that children enjoyed in this study working on the floor and arranging chairs in circles, pairs, etc. Students enjoy kneeling, sitting on the floor, even crawling. These different arrangements and activities help to the development of socialization in children.

- 4. Children need to be stimulated in all kinds of learning, especially when learning a foreign language.***

It is not a good idea to say "that's not right" to a child, it is better to say "let's try once more". It is always necessary to use praise with children and in a generous way. It gives them a feeling of success and achievement. This feeling motivates them in the learning process and arouses interest in the classroom.

- 5. During class activities children need freedom to move or go out of class if they need to.***

The nature of children is different in each child. Some children need more movement than others. All of these differences should

be taken advantage of by the English teacher. If the student wants to leave the classroom, the teacher can teach how to ask for permission in English to do so. If the student wants to go to the bathroom, the teacher should teach the formal language used in this situation. If the student wants to ask for a sharpener to one of his/her classmates, the teacher can take advantage of this and present the language used in this situation so the students are practicing English in a very communicative situation. Students like practicing real English in the classroom.

6. Children like to be spoken in English during the whole class.

According to Finocchiaro (1994) it is necessary to immerse students of a foreign language in that language and in the culture of that language during the class period. It is also important to consider that when English is learned as a foreign language, it is the class period, the only time students are faced with the language and have the opportunity to practice it in a close to a real situation. During the study students asked for the use of English even from visitor teachers who went from time to time to observe classes. If the teacher speaks the whole class in English, students internalize some language that later they use by themselves, as happens for instance with the commands given by the teacher.

The conclusions exposed above were drawn after a period of a five semester study through direct teaching, observation and feedback from the students who participated in the study. Different methodologies and techniques were used to test which ones are the most useful to teach English as a foreign language in our environment and it was possible also to design techniques and materials to facilitate

English learning in children. The following is a sample class that demonstrates somehow the process of the English class for children at the University of Nariño.

Topic: Geometric Figures

Language Content: Vocabulary of geometric figures

Structures: A _____ has _____

They can be short or long

What color is the _____?

Giving commands.

Materials: Flannel board, tape recording, VHS, figures, cans, sand.

Process:

1. The teacher shows the geometric figures one by one. The students repeat the sentences already taught: A triangle has three sides, etc.
2. After this presentation, the students identify and assimilate the new concepts. Then the teacher asks the questions: What is this? Later the teacher establishes the difference between one figure and another one, for instance: A triangle has three sides, they can be short or long. A circle goes round and round, there is no beginning and no end (showing them). Students can deduce the differences and draw conclusions; at the same time students count the sides.
3. The teacher asks students to make small groups where the students are going to work building the figures the teacher orders by singing the materials.

Students stand up forming different figures too.

4. During the last steps, the students have learned and played, so the teacher uses the flannel board. With the different figures students using their imagination create figures as: objects, animals, etc.
5. As follow-up activities students sing "The shape song" and watch a video related to this topic for a later identification of figures, objects and expansion of vocabulary.

It is interesting for English teachers to pay attention to what occurs in their classrooms and develop a constant research process. Real classroom situations are the ones which give teachers a clue on the best learning processes and learning styles. Professional Excellence derives from a continuous research process in EFL classrooms.

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