

TEACHING ENGLISH TO PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE FIRST LESSONS

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Abstract: *this article focuses on teaching English in pre-school. Focus on communication and interaction answer the expectations of those who teach young learners. Teachers should realize the necessity to understand how to form communicative competence at such an early stage. So, the article points out the importance of the very first lessons with children which should primarily strengthen young learners' confidence and desire to study a foreign language.*

Keywords: *pre-school teaching, friendly environment, communicative ability, drama activity, body language.*

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There is a lot of very good teaching in pre-school today. "Humanistic" approaches to language teaching share concerns with good pre-school and primary teaching (child-centered approach, activity-based learning): focus on communication and interaction (language use and context) answer the expectations of young learners' practitioners. However that involves coming to terms with many issues and considering the reasons for doing that. The core of this paper focuses its starting points on teaching communication at the very first lesson. Why it's not enough just to learn "Hello, I'm..." or "Hi, my name is..." The overall aim of teaching English is to speak English confidently, correctly and fluently, to be able to communicate. It is important for EL teachers not to follow the traditional way of teaching the language code only. It should include the activities that get the learners to use the language willingly, to cooperate with each other. Communicative ability (or competence) is a complex and complicated skill. Let me just remind you of some of its basic components [1]. Linguistic proficiency would be demonstrated by a control of sound system, structure and vocabulary, but the ability to interact goes beyond that and the learner needs to be aware of using the forms appropriately. Here we have to understand the functions of the participants, their roles, information they share, etc. This is socio-linguistic aspect of the communicative ability. Only in full socio-linguistic context is it possible to reach appropriateness. We are not only providing the learners with phonological, grammatical, rhythmic and intonation features of the language, but we ensure that they remember how speakers express the function, when and how it is better to say something and what is usually said on such occasions.

Real communication is also seen linked with concepts of how compensate for imperfect knowledge and sustain communication through verbal and non-verbal communication: repetition, paraphrasing, smiling, mime, gesture, etc. The sentence "I don't like this candy" could be a complaint, apology, agreement, or disagreement if we only consider sentence-level surface. But it's actual interpretation is possible with prosodic features (stress, intonation, etc.) and non-verbal features (gestures, eye contact, body language).

The research concluded that teachers' talk in the classroom is a valuable language input to second-language learners, especially when teachers simplify their language, use gestures linked with a strong context. Thus strategic and discourse competence require ability to string many sentences together into cohesive units, as well as readiness to take part in a dialogue and conversation. That is not possible without rules of conversation. For example: attention getting, turn taking, feeling secure. Without knowledge of cultural conventions learners may fail to communicate naturally and authentically.

Promoting real communication in the ELT classroom means to encourage an interest in the culture of the foreign countries. For example: for the New Year party we invite not only Father Frost and Snow Maiden, but Santa Claus as well. Or we play a Russian game and then find out how the Americans or Australian s would play it. Culturally familiar context is an essential ingredient in introducing the learner to new linguistic concepts. Here we come to the question of pupils' attitudes to the foreign language, which they are learning and the foreign culture with which it is associated. This issue - establishing positive attitudes - is recognized as one of the crucial ones, as it's closely connected with motivation.

The English language and its use are important parts of what a learner must learn, but that's not the whole purpose. The learners should acquire the strategies and the skills that will make them lifelong learners. That's a "learning to learn" strategy. The goal here is for children to become slightly conscious of what they are presented with, what helps them remember the words. Children gain confidence when they know what they already can do and how well they are doing it. Assessment and evaluation need to be developed from the start. After the first lesson of English, ask the children what they especially liked to do, or what they will tell their parents about the class. They like to be taken seriously; ask their opinion what they would like to do next time in class.

In order to reach the long term aim, teachers are to experience that language learning works best as human experience involving natural interpersonal communication, with authentic topics which are lively and

appropriate. Every component of the communicative ability must be referred to the age of learners and be present at the very first lesson to form the basics of the communicative ability.

“With pre-school and early primary learners presentation and practice activities are to be based mostly on oral skill and communicative interaction. These are games, which have purpose and provide a pleasurable experience, songs and rhymes, drawing and colouring, story-telling and play-acting.” [3, p. 23].

Nevertheless, it’s important to establish priorities for the child as a learner at the very first lesson.

It is not reasonable to have this expectation of speaking “fluently and correctly” at the beginning of the yearly language programme with young learners. They’ll have time for that. We probably would not focus on “Hello my name is...” from the linguistic point of view at the first or second lesson, though very often today it seems to precede over the value of providing a relax learning environment. For a child a new language is a new way. It’s a new game, a new experience . The priorities can include:

- providing the motivation to teach English;
- building confidence;
- encouraging children to communicate with the help of any language they have (mime, drawing, gesture);
- giving a child experience of a wide range of language in a nonthreatening environment;
- showing that English is fun, etc.

I was always affected by the aims put in the syllabus in Tanzania:

- children should display pleasure and confidence in exploring the language;
- children should want and dare to communicate;
- children should learn to cooperate with others and share with others.

During the teacher training course, I asked the participants to remember the phrase in Language 3 “hello, my name is...” and introduce themselves in front of the class. The result was not great. They repeated the sentence, but stated that experienced much stress being a new learner. The results were different when they were asked not only to introduce themselves, imitating the structure, but invent the gestures, characterizing them, and getting the next partner to copy it. The teachers stated that it was funny, noit stressful and even remembered the names of each other. Friendly atmosphere makes learning easier in any age group, but especially in a children’s ones. Children love to learn in a variety of ways, for example, by watching, by imitating, by doing thing, by acting. They are comfortable with routines and enjoy nice repetition [4, p. 4].

Drama-like group formation activities are not merely ice-breakers, but they support each other to make physical contact or get confidence. There is difference between getting to know names and to be able to risk speaking in front of the class.

Group formation activities might be:

- “Ruchejek” (a game when we choose a partner , saying “Hello”)
- “Broken telephone” (playing the mime),
- listening to nice songs and dancing,
- children draw the characters from the first page of the course-book,
- children act out the characters,
- they can play hide-and-seek or do any other activity,
- provoking, acting together.

“Children seem to use social context and intonation as guides to how to respond... They build up knowledge of word meanings from a wider range of contexts, and language gradually becomes a more precise and effective tool for communication” [2, p. 38].

In this way children will start learning in the environment which will:

- provide ideal context to introduce, recycle and practice the language
- produce maximum motivation
- encourage active participation
- provide joy and feeling of success.

Experience shows that the first lessons have a very strong effect om young learners, this is an early and important experience, which strengthens the child’s confidence in his/her own abilities in general and ability to learn a foreign language as well.

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