Models of Teaching Foreign Languages
to Young Children

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Modelos de enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras
en Educación Infantil

RESUMEN

El presente artículo trata de los procesos de adquisición y aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras en el contexto escolar de la etapa de Educación Infantil.

A pesar del gran número de teorías, opiniones, modelos, y propuestas existentes en la actualidad, no existe consenso sobre cuál es la metodología más adecuada para enseñar lenguas extranjeras a niños de corta edad. En estas líneas, nos centraremos en las investigaciones que han contribuido de forma más significativa a esta área de investigación.

Palabras clave: Niños. Inglés como lengua extranjera. Educación Infantil.

ABSTRACT

This article deals with young children's foreign language acquisition and learning within the scope of the very early stages of the school system.

Although there are many unorganized theories, opinions, models, and proposals about how to teach modern languages to young children, we will be focusing on the work of researches who have significantly contributed to this area of investigation.

Key words: Young children. English as a foreign language. Pre-school.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se centre sur les procès d'acquisition et apprentissage de langes des enfants qui commencent à étudier les langues étrangères à l'école maternelle.

Il y a beaucoup de théories, opinions modèles d'enseignement des langues vivantes aux petits enfants mais elles ne se met pas du toujours d'accord pour définir quelle est la meilleure méthode d'enseignement. Ici, nous allons faire une révision du travail des auteurs et rechercheurs qui ont contribué significativement à ce secteur d'investigation.

Mots-clés: Enfants. Langues étrangères. Education Maternelle.

SUMMARY: 1. Introduction. 2. Background. 3. Methodological aspects. 4. Conclusions. 5. Bibliography.

1. INTRODUCTION

Some authors of children's language acquisition theories are basically practitioner teachers with a great amount of experience in the field, but who have not researched long enough to scientifically base a real teaching method. However there is an increasing interest in this field which has been very productive lately.

2. BACKGROUND

We can start by highlighting the works of well-known authors such as Stern and Weinrib (1977), Dunn (1983, 1985), Halliwell (1993) and Aschwordy and Wakefield (1994) who have studied the peculiarities of teaching a second language at an early age. In Spain there are some remarkable studies which have been carried out by Rodríguez Sánchez and Mc Arthur (2001), Artigal, Arzamendi and Azpillaga (1996), Gálvez Díaz, (2001) and Mur (1998).

All these authors have analyzed the difficulties which occur when teachers such as themselves have had to cope with the teaching of English at pre-school levels. They try to offer some teaching guidelines and tips through the study of students' evolutional characteristics, comments on the methodological resources suitable for learning the foreign language, the adaptation of children's narrative resources and the planning of those aspects which had been taken into account in the development of projects and the interventions in early language learning.

Various publications in magazines have also addressed this issue in recent years with authors such as Calero Pérez et al (1999), Ramirez Palau and Serra Santasunsana (1999), Bermudo Santacruz (2000), Jones (2000), López Rodríguez (2000), Gil Fuentenebro (2000), Mercader, C. (2001), Lage Ríos and Sánchez Pérez (2001), who proposed different activities for young learners of English, depending on the age and maturity level of the child, which in most cases are usually experiences told through teachers' journals.

The work of López Rodríguez (2001) on the difficulties rural schools have to adequately teach English is worth highlighting. In these types of schools children of different ages and levels must work together in the same class which instigates the development of a modular type program for the learning of this foreign language. This author presents a method of following just one book, called «module», which would be used for the whole group of activities that are specific for each level. This investigation suggests that in rural schools, education can and must be taught in a different manner.

Kraus-Srebric (1979, in Barberá 1995: 82) reminds us that most language learning courses are modelled after the needs and cognitive capacity of adults. This researcher indicates that «younger students are motivated in a different manner than adults; lessons are not developed in an intensive way». Considering the fact that most of young children's classes consist of learning to sing songs, to recite rhymes and to play games, children never really learn to use the language for communication. «If the child needs to say something which is greatly important for him when he is

angry or sad, he cannot proceed to recite a poem or sing a song in order to find the sentence he needs at that moment». Therefore, he states that language should be taught from a communicative perspective. The student should be encouraged to do as many things as possible in the language. Poems and rhymes must be incorporated into the process in a way that they develop the learners' communicative skills. Kraus-Srebric proposes using situation games, puppets and other animated toys, wearing costumes, organizing competitions, arts and crafts, and field trips.

According to Mur (1998: 5), a child arrives to school full of instincts and skills which he has already begun to use and he will continue to use them for learning his own language as well as a foreign language like in the case of English:

- Children have the ability for indirect learning.
- They have a lively imagination.
- By nature they are creative in different communication situations.
- They are able to grasp the gist of a message.
- Children love speaking.

Children from 3-4 constantly move, jump go up and down the stairs, catch a large ball with both hands, walk tiptoeing, build towers, play with puzzles, etc. They are interested in their own body and other people's bodies. They look at their image in the mirror and enjoy disguising themselves with clothes and making up their faces. They are also able to discover which part is missing from an incomplete representation of a human figure. They know if they are girls or boys. They focus their attention and activities in the movement games.

At that age, they consolidate their personal hygiene: they are toilet trained, they are able to use spoon and fork, they drink alone, they get dressed and undressed with the help of an adult, they put their boots on the right foot. They participate in brief group activities, such as singing a song, listening to a story, playing with other children, looking to a wall chart and saying the words, playing with construction blocks, etc.

In their interactions with their classmates they demonstrate their first strategies of social insertion: they greet the people they know, they pay attention to the adults' requests, they play near other boys and girls and start sharing their toys, they follow the basic rules of use of objects and spaces. They imitate what other people do, they sing and dance when they hear some music.

Children from 4-5 perform their movements with more and more precision. They walk in a line, they go down the stairs they pedal on a tricycle, they cut out and stick on simple figures, they string beads with a certain criteria. They can draw the human figure with their basic parts (head, trunk and with arms and legs), they are able to draw themselves in their usual environment (house, school) and speak aloud to direct and regulate their actions. They are able to draw themselves using habitual objects, or represent their parents, siblings, or teachers. They use symbolic and simulation games as a natural resource of expression and recreation of habitual situations which are important for them. They consolidate their hygiene habits: they can tell the difference between clean and dirty, they wash their hands and face, they

hang their clothes on a hanger, they go to the toilet alone, they can get dressed, they put their dishes away, they look for a cloth to clean what they have dirtied and they are willing to cooperate with an adult and with their classmates.

They need to continuously speak to underline what they are doing, direct their actions, influence the others. They look for the adults' agreement and try to please them by repeating what they say or asking them questions about what to do and how.

Their behaviour is more and more social: they ask for permission to use toys and objects of collective use, they ask for help in case of difficulties, they help other children, they participate in collective conversation, say please and thank you without being asked to.

Children from 5-6 feel safe and autonomous in their movement they use all facilities in playgrounds, they hop and turn on a foot, they stake, they jump several stairs, they cut out shapes in a very precise way, they can write numbers and letters. They are interested in the wall charts and the stories, they want to know what is written on them and they express their preferences about fairy tales. They can tell where their name is and they can copy different letters.

They need more and more to share their games with other children; they are interested in learning different games and social rules, they invent fantastic stories and like that someone else tells them these stories. Their symbolic games reproduce adventures in imaginary settings.

Also, they consolidate the hygiene habits and self care, and make decisions about the clothes they like to wear, what to have for lunch, their hair style, what to do at home and at school, what to play, etc.

These children enjoy speaking and explaining things to the others, such as what they did yesterday, simple jokes, they ask for the meaning of unknown words, they define words, tell a story, they are also interested by the others' opinions and stories and choose their friends among the other children; they participate in collective conversations, respecting basic rules and can verbalize and explain to the others the rules of the game or how to perform an activity. They are able to belong to a steady playgroup, planning and helping the others to attain a common goal.

In the following chart you can see the development of children from 0-6 taking into account the three below mentioned aspects.

Chart 1. *Basic Aspects of the 0-6 Year Old Child Development.*

Age	Body coordination	Language Acquisition	Individual features and intelligence
0-1	– They start to focus their sight on objects and people. – They can sit up without help. – They can grab objects with their fingers (9 months). – They can stand on their feet with help. – They can walk with help (12 months).	– They start using their vocal cords and organs by crying and shouting (0-6 months). – They produce single syllables without sense (6-8 months). – They produce single syllables with sense (8-12 months).	– They feel insecure. – They need the constant presence of their mothers or known people. – They start learning and discovering the world through all their senses. – They like to play alone.
1-2	– They can walk without help (12-15 m). – They can scribble with a pencil (15-18 m). – They can climb stairs with help (15-18 months). – They have difficulty with turning or stopping suddenly 16-19 m. – They can go down the stairs with help (18-24 months). – They can use their feet to kick an object (ball, etc.). – They can go up and down stairs without help (24 m). – They can draw vertical lines (24 m)	– They can understand most of their parent's speech. – They can utter some simple meaningful words. – They start producing grammatically incorrect sentences.	– They cannot tell the difference between reality and fiction. – They start using their memory. – They are impatient and they all want the things they like at once. – They start taking on hygienic habits. – They are very stubborn. – They are selfish. – They like to play alone. – They are very enthusiastic. – They like learning. – They do not have a sense of time or space (right, left, etc.).
2-3	– They can jump 30 cm high (2 & 1/2 years). – They can skip (2 years and 2 months). – They can stand on one foot for a short period of time (2 years and 6 months). – They can draw horizontal lines and crosses (2 years and 6 months). – They can tip-toe. – They can catch a ball with open arms.	– They understand practically everything they hear. – They learn new vocabulary very fast. – They can orally express what they like. – If they do not know the words, they invent new words. – They make many grammar mistakes. – They can start with activities which prepare them for reading and writing.	– They start thinking in a symbolic way. – They feel both very self-sufficient and helpless. – Their character is very unstable. – They love playing. – They learn very fast but they forget very quickly. – They understand in / out / in front / behind. – They can tell the difference between day and night.

Age	Body Coordination	Language Acquisition	Individual Features and Intelligence
3-4	– They can draw circles. – Jump down from a certain height with feet together. – They can hop. – They can clothe and unclothe themselves with help. – They can walk sideways and backwards (3 and 1/2 years). – They can kick a ball more than 10 m. – They can catch a big ball bending their arms.	– They can understand almost everything in their mother tongue, and are able to figure out the meaning of words and expressions in a second or foreign language.	– They accept more and more social rules. – They like playing with other children. – They start having their own personality. – They can feel fear, and have nightmares.
4-5	– They can clothe and unclothe themselves without help. – They can button and unbutton things. – They can stand on one foot for more than 10 seconds. – They can catch a smaller ball bending their arms. – They can draw simple geometrical figures. – They can kick a ball with strength and precision. – They can run and jump (more than 1 metre) at the same time (4 years and 8 months).	– They understand everything. – They can still have some pronunciation problems, but are able to correct them. – They are curious about new words, and they learn very fast from their parents or teachers, media, etc.	– They start being able to control their feelings and behaviours. – They can express their own feelings. – They start feeling that they belong to a group.
5-6	– They can catch a bounced ball at waist level. – They can run 30 m in 10 seconds. – They can catch a ball with elbows tucked in.	– They use grammar almost correctly. – They start reading and writing.	– Children imitate adult's behaviors. – Relationships with classmates and friends are more and more important.
6-7	– They can draw squares, rectangles, triangles, oblongs, diamonds. – They can walk in a straight line.	– They do not make any mistakes with grammar. – They can read and write.	– They admire teachers and parents. – They can work very well in groups.

In order to fully take advantage of the creative linguistic ability that children have, it is necessary to provide them with situations where:

1. The desire to communicate forces the child to find some way to express himself.
2. Linguistic situations are unpredictable and they are not situations where a child repeats sayings and expressions, but they serve as a stimulation for the child to actively create language on his own.

In order to put these ideas into practice, there must be a deep understanding of which educational stage the child is in, as well as the teaching environment. Pérez Esteve (1999: 77) points out:

> «Therefore, the initial efforts should be concentrated, in my opinion, on favouring the knowledge of the characteristics of children of this age as well as in content organization, the most appropriate methodological strategies, the ideal use of space, and the use of all resources available in the classrooms. All of these things can be a great help in the learning of a foreign language.»

All these aspects lead to one basic question: What influences the way that teachers teach? It seems as though there are numerous factors that affect teachers and that produce observed variations in the classroom for one main reason: teachers were once students and their way of teaching reflects the way in which they were taught. Freeman and Freeman (2001: 24) sum up these influences and their results:

Chart 2. *Factors Which Affect the Use of the Classroom*

Influences	Results
Past experiences	Teach as we were taught
Educational experiences	Teach as we were taught to teach
Colleagues/Administrators	Teach as others teach or as we are required to teach
Changes in teaching situation	Adjust teaching to new school or level or new students
Materials	Teach using available or required materials
Politics	Teach as those outside of education mandate
Students	Teach in response (or reaction) to students

Source: Freeman and Freeman (2001: 24).

All these factors reflect external influences and the teacher should take advantage of the positive ones, but overall the teacher must find his or her own path while considering a series of aspects that Halliwell (1993: 9) summarizes while stating that a teacher should give priority to:

Centring the methodology on the natural abilities and instincts that the children bring into the class.

Work on «attitude» objectives as well as «concept» objectives.

Carry out various activities where real, natural use of language occurs as a part of learning and not only intentional use of language.

For this reason, games are so useful and important not only because they are fun, but also because this playful element creates a desire to communicate and games can produce endless amounts of unpredictable situations.

Brain teasers or riddles, where children have to guess a specific sentence or word, are a very good example of the phenomenon of indirect learning. The child does not try to learn specific sentences, he is trying to guess the right answer. However, after carrying out this kind of activity, the child retains words and expressions that had only been introduced before and not fully learned. They become permanently recorded in their minds and their pronunciation may have even improved as well. In fact, it is a very adept way to learn sentences as well as structures but indirectly since the mind is concentrating on the task instead of concentrating on language. The same thought process is followed as in the mother tongue, which is acquired subconsciously through immersion and use.

Conscious and direct learning as well as indirect or acquisition help the child make the new language his or her own. Experience indicates that everyone uses part of both systems. Whether one is used more than the other depends on a combination of intellectual development, temper and circumstances. In practice, all of these play an important role. Direct and conscious learning seems to encourage an elaborated accuracy of the language, while acquisition stimulates a spontaneous and more fluent use. Ideally, there should be a development of accuracy as well as fluency. Therefore, the opportunity to use both systems must be provided in class. The teacher should be very clearly decided on which learning system is going to be used at any specific time so that the child knows what is being presented in the different activities and what must be done. If not, the different processes can interfere.

The problem lies in the fact that children's abilities to consciously learn the grammatical forms and structures still have not been developed in preschool and early Childhood Education. On the other hand, all children have an innate instinct for language acquisition. In order to be able to put this characteristic to use, the teacher must deliberately develop and carry out an appropriate methodology through real tasks, or interesting activities that aren't just language exercises, but that also give the children the chance to use and elaborate language while their minds are focused on the task. This is why games are not only a playful addition to class but they also provide an opportunity to use and assimilate real use of the language while the mind is focused on participating in the game as well as being a very effective opportunity for indirect learning. Halliwell (1993: 6) affirms that, «…games should not be disregarded as a waste of time. They also shouldn't be considered as something that can be introduced as a time filler at the end of class or as a prize for doing «real» work; they *are* real work. Games make up a central part of the process of language acquisition, which is wonderful because children have such a strong sense of fun and games.»

However, games are not the way of reflecting young children's personalities in the language classroom. The roles of stimulation, imagination, creativity and fantasy are also of great importance. Children love using their imagination. In the L2 class, the capacity for letting imagination and fantasy flow plays a fundamental part. Halliwell (1993: 7) adds that if we accept the role of fantasy in children's lives, we can admit that it provides another strong stimulation for the use of real language. We must take advantage of this in language classes and stimulate the children's creative imagination in a way that they will want to use the language to share their

ideas. For example, they could draw and describe a monster and without a doubt they will want to share something about the monster they have drawn with their friends. Children like to talk and ask each other questions such as what it eats, what it likes or how old it is.

Most foreign language study programs in Spain identify three types of contents: conceptual, attitudinal, and procedural, according to the already outdated LOGSE.

The first two are related to linguistic elements and their use. The description of these contents is usually organized from one of the following focuses:

Structures: contents are organized following grammatical structures.

Topics and situations: in these programs work is organized around topics or situations.

Functions: in this case the base is the language objective.

Each teacher can reflect any of these focuses in their class planning. In fact, many curriculum plans adopt a pragmatic combination of the three of them. Although no matter what the course of action or methodology is, this type of contents addresses the elements of language and the way the student combines them for their use. Good programs aren't limited to concepts and they take into consideration students' attitudes and performance. They are contents that are related to their learning experience.

The balance between attitudinal content and conceptual content varies depending on each student who passes through the educational system. In the last few years of formal compulsory education the conceptual contents have tended to be predominantly in preparation for university access exams. The work in the first years, however, can be used to highlight attitudinal contents. Conceptual contents must not be lost, but priority should be given to promoting attitudes and performance. All of these concepts can be taken advantage of by the teacher in a foreign language class as well as in their mother tongue.

On the other hand, in order to follow through with this integration in second language in Early Childhood Education, the characteristics of the development of language in the mother tongue must be kept in mind in addition to the aforementioned skills. Mur (1998: 6) says,

> «This stage is an appropriate time since it coincides with the development of communicative competency in their own language.
> Oral language is more predominant than gestural language.
> They are always asking questions. (curiosity)
> Their vocabulary and pronunciation is increasing.
> Their attention span is closely linked to the interest that things around them arouse.
> They follow orders.
> They begin to interiorize symbols and interpret them when they are seen in images.
> They are able to narrate a series of three sequential images.
> They can define objects and their use.
> They have more aptitude for the development of the basic communication skills.»

Keeping these aspects in mind, the same author proposes a globalized methodology where the key is in the coordination between the teachers of all the other subjects

and the teachers specialized in English with complete correspondence in all areas. In English, contents are contextualized on the experience of the children and they are also associated with other subjects. Learning should be significant and should take into account the previous lessons with an initial evaluation. Attention should be individualized on many occasions, attending to diversity. The work is divided into didactical units or projects with an approach which is totally communicative; oral skills are developed, audio-visual equipment is used, and class groups are flexible.

For this reason Mur affirms that there are large coincidences between the methodology to be used in the subject of English and in the stages of Early Childhood Education, and that this should be considered in the development of the methodology to be used. Here is one possible structure (1998: 17):

> 1. «Learning should always be significant.
> There should always be a previous level evaluation.
> The chosen centres of interest should be something the students value.
> A global and integrated perspective should always be maintained.
> Classroom organization must be flexible.
> Audio-visual aids and computers must be used.
> There must be individual attention.
> Didactic units should be followed.
> The focus should be communicative.
> Methodological resources and motivating materials should be used such as pets/dolls, dramatizations (finger, hand or shadow puppets), songs, stories, games, images (realia, pictures, flashcards, wall-charts, costumes, marionettes…)
> There should be a flexible organization of activities.

Another important aspect to consider is the use of the second language above the use of the mother tongue. It is proven that a total immersion situation is the best option when acquiring a second language due to the fact that, «… in the spontaneous learning of a second language, sociability has been found to be a major influence on rate of learning.» (Wong-Fillmore, 1979: 127) Wells (1992: 126) also affirms that the previous author proves that interaction with students of a second language is fundamental: «On the basis of her longitudinal study of five-to-seven year-old Spanish-speaking children as they acquired English during the course of one school year, she rates active involvement in interaction with speakers of the target language as a major determinant of success». But in reference to foreign language acquisition, the case is quite different. The biggest contact children have with the second language is in the classroom (not the *only* contact nowadays thanks to television, radio, music, the internet, etc.), so the amount of input that is received in this language is very important.

Now we must add one more aspect to all those previously mentioned, and that is affectivity. Although this aspect not only affects, or should affect, small children, it is especially relevant in this stage because of the special situation and characteristics children possess at this age. The topic of affectivity is not a new one; starting in the seventies, researchers began to consider it when carrying out the development of their educational plans. Therefore, methods such as Suggestopedia, The Silent

Way, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, Communicative Approach or Natural Approach not only contemplated the affective aspect of teaching languages but it was also the centre of their research as described by authors like Gattegno (1972), Curran (1976), Asher (1977), Lozanov (1978), Larsen-Freeman (1986, 1987), Richards and Rodgers (1986), Stevick (1976, 1980, 1990, 1996, 1998).

Given the importance of affectivity, it is the teachers' responsibility to include it in their curriculum planning, and it should not be considered as yet another responsibility put on them but it should be embraced as a facilitator to carry out their job, as Arnold and Brown (1999: 24) affirm:

> «As language teachers, we already have many areas of competence to attend to. Yet adding one more, rather than increasing teachers' burdens, might make attending to the other areas an easier task. At the same time it may lead to a more holistic development of our students as individuals and as responsible participants in a healthy society.»

These characteristics could very well sum up those defended by the authors who have gone deeper into the topic of teaching a foreign language to small children.

4. CONCLUSIONS

If we consider all the aforementioned aspects it is easy to conclude that beginning foreign language education during the stages of Early Childhood Education is very positive and not only feasible, but also recommended. In addition, it is important to present the language integrated with other subjects on the curriculum because the aim is for children to see L2 as something natural and normal. Therefore, it must not be left out or isolated from the rest of the areas of learning.

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