

Teaching a Foreign Language to Very Young Learners in a Natural Way

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Abstract

Preschool institutions across European countries often implement foreign language instruction in their curriculum. The amount of classroom hours is often very limited, sometimes to just one hour per week. The number of children in the foreign language class may vary from a few learners to over twenty learners. There are also other factors that affect the learning process, for instance, the presence of a native speaker and, above all, the teaching techniques and strategies used in the foreign language classroom. The present paper offers some practical tips for teaching a foreign language to very young learners in an effective way. They are based on empirical findings from a two-year EFL project in a preschool institution in Lower Austria. The activities used during the English lessons aimed at creating a natural speaking environment and providing learners with the opportunity to learn English in a natural way, as if they were learning their mother tongue. The goal of the project was to achieve sequential bilingualism of the learners. English was the only language used during the lessons and a wide spectrum of teaching methods and classroom activities were used to enhance learning with remarkably positive results.

Keywords: *Effective teaching techniques, foreign languages, natural speaking environment, very young learners;*

1. Introduction

Children between three and six years old are still developing language skills in their mother tongue as they are growing cognitively and emotionally; therefore, learning a second language at this age may become a smooth and rewarding process, especially if acquisition occurs in a natural setting.

Visual aids support natural development of the child's language competence and enrich him emotionally and cognitively [4]. Pantomime including facial expressions, posture, gestures, and motions, is an effective technique for expressing feelings and demonstrating activities and ideas. Storytelling helps to develop listening skills and increase the learners' motivation, creativity and phantasy.

Songs, rhymes and chants as "listen and repeat" accompanied by appropriate motions or dancing belong to the type of activities always loved by children. They contribute to the development of various language skills: pronunciation, weak and strong forms, rhythm, stress, vocabulary and sentence-structure. In connection with dance and imitation they also contribute to the physical development of children [7].

Various language skills as well as the learners' social skills can be practiced through games. In general, "games can be used with a specific educational aim, while containing elements of amusement supporting relaxation and ease" [3].

Drawing can be a useful activity to reveal the learner's level of understanding of the foreign language. Through drawing, the child can communicate his or her feelings, opinions, and reveal his or her inner world, therefore it is a very effective technique in foreign language learning [5].

Story reading is a strategy through which various language skills may be acquired and practiced. With the appropriate pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities, learners are able to adopt a number of phonological, grammatical, syntactic, lexical, semantic and pragmatic features of the target language.

Through role-plays, skits and drama the foreign language is presented as an integrate whole in meaningful contexts for meaningful communication. "Drama is an active approach to learning where participants identify with roles and situations to be able to engage with, explore and understand the world they live in" [2].

2. Aims of research and methodology

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The present paper is part of a research project carried out in a multi-ethnic community in Lower Austria. One of the ways to access the community was through teaching English to its youngest members, i.e. three to six year-old children, who attend the local kindergarten. Coming from families with different ethnic background and mother tongues, the children used German as lingua franca in kindergarten. During their English lessons, however, the English language was used exclusively for communication between the teacher and the learners. The aim of this paper is to show how story reading to very young learners may be used as an effective teaching strategy leading to remarkably productive results, if it is performed in a natural, communicative and interactive way.

The activities and methods proposed in the paper make use of various visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, social, and emotional teaching strategies with the purpose to achieve a certain goal, considering the very young learners' type of memory, which is short-term, mechanical, unintentional and emotional [8]. They follow two major theories in language teaching: a) the approach proposed by Vygotsky who emphasizes the role of social interaction in second language learning, and b) Bruner's idea of "spiral curriculum".

3. Teaching English through story reading

Story reading is a powerful means of helping the child to develop language skills not only in his mother tongue but also in the second language. With the appropriate pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities, story reading might become an extremely enjoyable and effective teaching strategy even for very young learners of a foreign language.

Indication of some of the invaluable aspects of story reading as well as the proposed practical tips for carrying out this type of activity in the EFL classroom proceed from the author's experience with reading Jonathan London's book *Froggy gets dressed* to very young learners of English [9].

Froggy gets dressed is a story about a little frog who wakes up in the midst of winter and wishes to go out and play in snow. His mother, however, keeps trying to stop Froggy from going outside, because "frogs are supposed to sleep all winter" by repeatedly pointing out that he has forgotten to put on some apparel, such as pants, shirt, coat, etc. and eventually, his long johns. The story is abundant in onomatopoeia and dialogue, suitable for reading aloud, full of child-pleasing sound effects and accompanied by colourful illustrations.

3.1 Pre-reading activities

During the pre-reading activities, the learners may first be introduced to a frog, which happens to be the main protagonist in the story, through an animal cut out of cardboard and coloured, sufficiently large, serving as a unique visual aid. While introducing Froggy to the children, the teacher may engage his audience in a conversation about the animal, asking about his colour and size, what he does, where he lives, what he eats, etc. The learners will probably become enthusiastic about the topic and become curious about why the character of Froggy has been introduced to them. They will most likely imitate the sound frogs make and act out the way frogs jump. This introductory conversation about the frog may lead into another pre-reading activity, which is learning a song about a frog:

*Frog is jumping up and down, up and down, up and down.
Frog is jumping up and down, up to the sky.*

This short catchy song about a *frog* may help learners memorize the name of the animal through the memorization of the song. In order to reinforce learning the song, children may be invited to combine singing with motions imitating *jumping* frogs. Also, the positions *up* and *down* may be visually demonstrated by the teacher. Lastly, a painting or drawing showing the sky and some of the objects that can be seen in the sky, such as the sun, a rainbow, clouds, etc. could serve as a useful aid to demonstrate the word *sky*.

The third pre-reading activity may focus on reviewing and practicing words belonging to the lexical field of clothing. The learners may have been introduced to the names of different items of clothing in English previously and be quite familiar with most of the vocabulary related to clothing present in the story. Various items of clothing may be used during this activity to, so as to help learners make a visual and mental association between the referent (object) and the linguistic sign (word). The learners may be invited to actively participate in this last pre-reading activity by answering questions about the names of different parts of clothing, by pointing at or picking out the appropriate item from the pile.

3.2 Story reading

Having performed the pre-reading activities described in Section 3.1, the learners should be prepared for listening to the story *Froggy gets dressed*. During this reading activity, the teacher may first let the learners become familiar with the main characters in the story, i.e. Froggy and his mother, while pointing at pictures of both characters. Also, pictures such as Froggy's bed, the window and the snowflakes seen outside the window, etc. may be displayed and described in an interactive way.

During reading, the teacher may comment on those linguistic items, which may be crucial to understanding the story. Different words in the story may be accompanied by motions and actions, for instance, sleeping, waking up, putting on different pieces of clothing, etc. Involving learners during story reading is also advisable. The teacher may make a stop at different places in the story and ask questions related to what is being read. Varying pitch, intonation, loudness of voice, enunciating clearly, making pauses, letting children participate in repeating onomatopoeic sounds, such as *flop, flop, flop* in "He flopped back inside – flop, flop, flop" are techniques which help create more suspense in the story, sustain the listeners' attention and even engage learners in the reading activity.

3.3 Post-reading activities

Having finished reading the story, the teacher may follow up asking the learners questions about the main protagonist and his mother, about the events taking place in the story, the setting, the parts of clothing mentioned in the story and the plot in general: introduction, middle and end. Finally, the *Frog is jumping* song can be sung.

3.4 Acquired skills

This story reading activity permitted learners to acquire and practice the following skills: a) pronunciation, prosodic features: stress, rhythm, and intonation; aspects of connected speech: assimilation, elision, and linking; b) review the vocabulary of clothing; c) acquire a number of commonly used collocations, e.g. *put on his hat, tugged on his mittens, flopped back outside, slipped his pants on, pulled on his boots, tied on his scarf*, etc.; d) review personal pronouns: *I, you, he, it*; e) review possessive pronouns: *my, your, his*; f) acquire some of the regular and irregular simple past tense forms: *had, went, said, let it drop, cried, said, yelled, called, woke up, flopped, looked, was*; g) learn opposite verb forms using particles *on* and *off* or derived forms: *tugged on/off, pulled on/off, (un)buttoned, (un)tied, (un)zipped*; h) learn synonyms: *cried, yelled, said, called*; i) learn antonyms: *inside - outside; wake up – go to sleep*; j) practice question formation: *Did you forget to put something on? Don't you know?* k) become familiar with some exclamations: *No! No! I want to play in the snow! I'm awake! Oops!* l) practice commands: *Go back to sleep!* m) practice social skills through active participation in the pre-reading, reading and post-reading activities.

4. Conclusion

The present paper recommends story reading as an effective teaching strategy for teaching English as a foreign language to very young learners. This activity includes various types of visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, social, and emotional aids employed against the background of the natural and communicative approach.

The focus of the story reading activity using the text of *Froggy gets dressed* is to follow up on several theories: a) on the behaviourist theory, according to which "learning means creating habits, developing automatic responses (conditioned reflexes) to selected stimuli, and using reinforcement" [6]. These habits were being created through memorization, using a lot of repetition and drills; b) on Vygotsky's claim that learning is reinforced by social interaction [1]. Learners were constantly engaged in pair and group activities which helped them acquire the social dimension as well as to practice the social function of the target language; c) on Bruner's idea of a 'spiral curriculum', according to which essential concepts are being taught/learned and returned to in several ways, each time on a higher level [1]. Using the story reading activity described above, learners were able to learn and practice the vocabulary related to the lexical field of clothing in several ways during the pre-reading, reading and post-reading stages; d) on Schuman's (1996) claim that "whatever concept/cognitive development a child masters in the native language is transferred to the second language" [1]. The teacher strived to create meaningful communicative situations in the classroom, as close to mother language acquisition as possible, through which learners were exposed to a variety of printed, auditory, and visual aids in the target language. This helped the learners to acquire linguistic items through real-life experience.

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