



Teaching English to Young Learners

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CHAPTER 1

Who is the “young learner”?

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we will address some questions that are fundamental to the teaching of younger learners. We will look in particular at the following questions:

- How are “young learners” defined?
- Through what developmental stages do young learners pass, and what are the implications of these developmental stages for instruction?
- What are the main challenges and solutions in TEYL?
- What is the optimal age for learning a foreign language?

At the end of the chapter you should be able to:

- provide your own definition of “young learners”
- describe the developmental stages that learners go through between birth and puberty

- discuss the practical implications of learner characteristics at different developmental stages
- describe challenges and solutions in teaching younger learners
- discuss the pros and cons of the early introduction of a foreign language.

2. Who are “young learners”?

REFLECT/ACT:

How would you define “young learners”?

How would you classify them in terms of ages and stages?

The term “young learner” covers a large chronological age span: from around 3 years of age to 15. Some writers and researchers try to segment learners strictly according to age: 3- to 5-year-olds, 6- to 8-year-olds, and so on. While, as we shall see, children do exhibit different mental and social characteristics at different ages, a strict segmentation is not particularly helpful. As Pinter (2006, p. 2) points out, all children are unique, and two children at the same chronological age can exhibit markedly different characteristics. Pinter prefers to identify “younger” and “older” learners, something I will also follow in this book. So, what are the characteristics of older and younger learners? Pinter identifies the following:

Younger learners	Older learners
Children are at pre-school or in the first couple of years of schooling.	These children are well established at school and comfortable with school routines.

Younger learners

Generally, they have a holistic approach to language, which means that they understand meaningful messages but cannot analyze language yet.

They have lower levels of awareness about themselves as well as about the process of learning.

They have limited reading and writing skills, even in their own language.

Generally, they are more concerned about themselves than others.

They have limited knowledge about the world.

They enjoy fantasy, imagination and movement.

<i>Younger learners</i>	<i>Older learners</i>
Generally, they have a holistic approach to language, which means that they understand meaningful messages but cannot analyze language yet.	They show growing interest in analytical approaches, which means that they begin to take an interest in language as an abstract system.
They have lower levels of awareness about themselves as well as about the process of learning.	They show a growing level of awareness about themselves as language learners and their learning.
They have limited reading and writing skills, even in their first language.	They have well-developed skills as readers and writers.
Generally, they are more concerned about themselves than others.	They have a growing awareness of others and their viewpoints.
They have limited knowledge about the world.	They have a growing awareness about the world around us.
They enjoy fantasy, imagination and movement.	They begin to show an interest in real-life issues.

In the next section, I will present a more “fine-grained” analysis of the developmental stages through which learners pass. However, as you read these, bear in mind what I have just said about individual learner variation and the fact that there will only be a “rough fit” between chronological age and developmental stages. (Remember that Mozart wrote his first symphony — Symphony Number 1 in E flat major — at the age of eight!)

3. *Through what developmental stages do young learners pass, and what are the implications of these developmental stages for instruction?*

By the very nature of your job as a teacher of young learners, you must be aware of children’s basic physical and psychological needs. Teachers of young learners should provide the care necessary to meet these needs so that they can thrive and focus on learning. In other words, teachers of young learners have two jobs, to provide care and to provide instruction. In order to provide the best possible instruction, you need to adjust educational experiences to meet the developmental stages of the individual child. (Linse, 2005, p. 2)

The Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget identified the following developmental stages in children as they progress from birth to adolescence:

- Sensori-motor
- Pre-operational
- Concrete-operational
- Formal-operational.

The social, psychological evolves through these four stages paragraphs below.

The earliest stage, the Sensori-motor stage, lasts from birth to approximately two years of age. The child is learning to interact with the environment. Developmental psychologists describe the early stages of human development included, in terms of the child’s interaction with its environment.) Linguistically, the child is in the early growth of the child’s vocabulary. The child is using “proto-language” to real language. The child’s proto-language consists of a rudimentary system of meanings.) The child is learning to use each of which will have only a single meaning. For example, the child might say, “I’m hungry. Feed me!” or “I’m cold. Put a sweater on me.” The child’s development of grammar, syntax, and the potential of the learner to use language in different kinds begins to emerge.

At the Pre-operational stage, from approximately two years of age to seven, the child is egocentric and centered around him/her. The ability to use language is limited. Linguistically, at this stage the child is learning to use a grammatical system and, by the end of the stage, the target grammatical system is already in place. The structures that will not be acquired until the next stage.

The creative power of grammar

The social, psychological and intellectual development of children evolves through these four stages. These beliefs are expounded in the paragraphs below.

The earliest stage, the Sensori-motor stage, extends from birth to approximately two years of age. At this initial stage, the child learns to interact with the environment by manipulating objects. (Some developmental psychologists define "learning" on the part of all creatures, humans included, in terms of the interaction between an organism and its environment.) Linguistically, this stage is characterized by the rapid growth of the child's vocabulary, and the gradual transformation from "proto-language" to real language through the emergence of grammar. (A proto-language consists of a rudimentary sound system and a rudimentary system of meanings.) The child will possess an idiosyncratic set of "words," each of which will have only a single meaning. Wells (1981, p. 107) cites the example of a small boy, Mark, who used "num-num" to mean "Give me food, I'm hungry. Feed me!" However, this is all it meant. It did not mean "I'm cold. Put a sweater on me," or "I'm tired. Put me to bed." With the development of grammar, this one-to-one relationship is uncoupled, and the potential of the learner to make a range of meanings of many different kinds begins to emerge.

At the Pre-operational stage, which extends from around two years of age to seven, the child is egocentric and thinks the world revolves around him/her. The ability to think logically is also extremely limited. Linguistically, at this stage learners consolidate their knowledge of the grammatical system and, by the age of seven, their acquisition of the target grammatical system is almost complete (although there are complex structures that will not be acquired until the next stage of development).

The creative power of grammar is described in the following way:

Unlike symbol systems such as systems of road signs, where there is a one-to-one relationship between the symbol and the thing it represents, language is not so constrained. This is because, in the evolution of language, grammar intervened between the symbols and the entities and events that the symbols represent. Imagine that English had no grammar and its lexicon consisted of only seven words: Betty, Bill, Ronan, tall, short, interesting, lonely. It would only be possible to say seven things. Along comes grammar — specifically the singular form of the *verb* 'to be'. We can now say twelve things. Betty is tall, Betty is short, Betty is interesting, Betty is lonely, Bill is tall, etc. Add in the plural form of the verb 'to be' plus the *conjunction* 'and' and we can say an additional twelve things. Betty and Bill are tall. Add the ability to form questions by placing the verb in front of the subject: Is Ronan lonely? Are Betty and Bill interesting? and the generative power of language begins to make itself felt. (Nunan, 2007, pp. 12-13)

The Concrete-operational stage extends from around seven to eleven years of age. Intellectually, the child begins developing the ability to separate the self from the environment and to think logically. He/She also begins to make generalizations from the environment, although this ability is limited.

The Formal-operational stage marks the end of the developmental process in the child. This stage begins at around the age of eleven. At this stage, abstract thinking develops and the child is now able to generalize beyond his/her immediate context from the instance to the general. This stage marks the onset of puberty (although these days, puberty is occurring at a younger and younger age, particularly amongst females). Neurolinguistically, brain lateralization occurs. This means that the two hemispheres of the brain become separated and begin to function

independently, communicating base of the brain known as the controversial, some researchers functions can't move from one lateralization.)

4. What are the main c

In this section, I will address the learners:

- Cognitive development
- Motivation
- Attention
- Multi-level groups
- Assessment.

REFLECT/ACT:

In what ways do you motivation, attention might pose challenges learners?

Cognitive Development

As we saw in the preceding section developmental changes in their stages and their psychological into consideration when designing

independently, communicating through a thick bundle of fibers at the base of the brain known as the corpus callosum. (Although this is rather controversial, some researchers have questioned the assertion that brain functions can't move from one hemisphere to the other after brain lateralization.)

4. What are the main challenges and solutions in TEYL?

In this section, I will address the following challenges of teaching young learners:

- Cognitive development
- Motivation
- Attention
- Multi-level groups
- Assessment.

REFLECT/ACT:

In what ways do you think that cognitive development, motivation, attention span, multi-level groups and assessment might pose challenges for the teacher of young language learners?

Cognitive Development

As we saw in the preceding section, learners go through significant developmental changes in their journey from infancy to adulthood. These stages and their psychological and social characteristics need to be taken into consideration when designing learning experiences and creating

tasks and materials for learners at different stages. It makes little sense to introduce formal grammar to learners before the Concrete-operational stage, or to any stage prior to the Formal-operational. Inductive learning activities, requiring learners to generate rules from samples of language, are unlikely to be successful before the stage of formal operations.

At the earliest stages of learning, the child can follow single-step instructions followed by two-step and then three-step instructions. He/She can understand symbolic concepts such as numbers and letters prior to beginning reading. Word-play activities, such as rearranging scrambled letters to make words, come next, followed by the ability to grasp abstract concepts.

Stages of Learning

- Follows one-step instructions
- Follows two-step instructions
- Follows three-step instructions
- Understands symbolic concepts (e.g., numbers, letters)
- Likes reading or being read to
- Likes playing with words
- Grasps abstract concepts

Motivation

Motivation refers to a combination of factors:

Effort **PLUS** desire to achieve the goal of learning the language
PLUS favorable attitudes toward learning the language.
(Gardner, 1985, p. 10)

Educational psychologists distinguish between two types of motivation: extrinsic/instrumental motivation and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is the drive to do or learn something for its own sake, such as good school grades. Intrinsic motivation is the drive to do or learn something for its own sake.

In formal schooling (and in language learning), research indicates that many learners lack clarity over the goals of the task, don't or can't relate, and probably don't see the value. A large part of learners that the effort they put in simply isn't paying off: there is little evidence of progress. Another factor may be the pressure of students' daily lives.

Strategies that can help to improve motivation are in the following box:

- Make learning goals clear
- Select content to which learners can relate
- Scaffold the learning process
- Personalize the learning
- Encourage group/colaborative learning
- Provide opportunities for choice
- Provide evidence of progress

Attention

As we have seen, young children have limited attention spans. For this reason, it is important to vary activities and materials.

Educational psychologists commonly refer to two types of motivation: extrinsic/instrumental and intrinsic/integrative. Extrinsic motivation is the drive to do or learn something for an external reward, such as good school grades. Intrinsic motivation is the drive to do or learn something for its own sake.

In formal schooling (and this is true for all subjects, not just foreign language learning), research indicates that motivation declines over time. In language learning, I believe that this is due to a number of factors: lack of clarity over the goals of the learning, content to which learners don't or can't relate, and probably most important of all, a feeling on the part of learners that the effort they are making to master the language simply isn't paying off: there is little or no evidence of progress for their efforts. Another factor may be that the foreign language is irrelevant to the students' daily lives.

Strategies that can help to maintain motivation are set out in the following box:

- Make learning goals explicit.
- Select content to which learners can relate.
- Scaffold the learning process.
- Personalize the learning process.
- Encourage group/collaborative learning.
- Provide opportunities for authentic communication.
- Provide evidence of progress.

Attention

As we have seen, young children have a limited attention span. For this reason, it is important to vary activities so that learners don't turn off.

In Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, the students perform physical actions and carry out instructions given by the teacher or an audio source. These types of activities are useful for maintaining motivation and also help to cater to different learning styles: visual, auditory and kinesthetic. It's also important to be aware of possible physical or mental difficulties of individual learners, including Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), hearing problems and visual problems.

In summary, we can deal with limited attention spans if we:

- vary activities
- are aware of and understand the value of TPR (Total Physical Response)
- cater to different learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic
- are aware of the physical and mental difficulties of individual learners (Attention Deficit Disorder — ADD)

Multi-level groups

Whenever we have more than one student in a learning group, we will have diversity. We commonly think of diversity in terms of levels of language proficiency. However, diversity also includes the learner's first language, and whether the first language shares a common script with English, as well as personality, aptitude, attitude and motivation, learning styles and strategies, cognitive style, access to learning opportunities outside of the classroom, and so on. In catering to diversity, learning styles and strategies are particularly important, which is why we have given it a chapter in its own right.

In terms of varying proficiency levels, in most situations it is not feasible to provide different types of input (listening and reading materials).

The solution, therefore, is that learners are required to do with conversation and checking off from challenging than listening to the that are heard.

Diversity can actually be a then your teaching, and the cons students, will be all the richer.

- Think beyond proficiency ways — first language language shares a common aptitude, attitude and strategies, cognitive style outside of the classroom
- Modify tasks so that different levels of proficiency
- Cater to differences in learning process
- Exploit the diversity in learning process.

Assessment

Assessment refers to the techniques analyzing learner language, to determine These are intended to answer the "done?" The broader field of evaluation well have we done?" ("We" being school, the curriculum and materials)

The solution, therefore, must lie in varying the difficulty of what learners are required to do with the input. For example, listening to a conversation and checking off from a list the names that are heard is less challenging than listening to the conversation and writing down the names that are heard.

Diversity can actually be a strength. If you can draw on diversity, then your teaching, and the consequent learning opportunities of the students, will be all the richer.

- Think beyond proficiency: young learners differ in many ways — first language background, and whether the first language shares a common script with English, personality, aptitude, attitude and motivation, learning styles and strategies, cognitive style, access to learning opportunities outside of the classroom, and so on.
- Modify tasks so that they can be done with learners at different levels of proficiency.
- Cater to differences in learning and cognitive style.
- Exploit the diversity of your learners by personalizing the learning process.

Assessment

Assessment refers to the techniques and procedures for collecting and analyzing learner language, to determine what learners can and cannot do. These are intended to answer the question “How well have the learners done?” The broader field of evaluation seeks to answer the question “How well have we done?” (“We” being inclusive of the individual teacher, the school, the curriculum and materials.)

Assessment for learning

We assess learners for many reasons: to place them in the appropriate class, diagnose their strengths and weaknesses, provide them with certification, etc. (We'll look in greater detail at these and other purposes later in the book.) None, to my mind, however, is more important than assessment for learning. I believe that all schools should see assessment as an integral part of the learning process. Seeing assessment as part of the learning process has practical implications. It suggests, for example, that learners should be given immediate feedback on how well they have performed. (We know from research that the closer the feedback is to the performance, the more effective it will be.)

All teaching tasks can be turned into in-class assessment tools, with the addition of two elements: (i) criteria for judging the task, and (ii) some kind of feedback mechanism for students. Remember the following formula if you want to turn a learning task into an assessment task:

Learning task + criteria + feedback = Assessment task

5. Conclusion

In this opening chapter, we have addressed a number of fundamental questions about the teaching of languages to younger learners. We began the chapter by identifying who the young learner is, and describing the developmental stages through which young learners pass. Then we discussed five major challenges that teachers of young learners will almost certainly encounter: cognitive development, motivation, attention span, multi-level groups and assessment. These are not the only challenges you will face in teaching young learners, but if you can deal with these, then you will be well on the way to being a successful teacher of young language learners.

REFLECT/ACT:

Visit one of the following websites.
Make a list of three things you have learned.

- The Child Development Center (www.childdevelopment.com)
- National Association of Young Children (www.naeyc.org)

References and further reading

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- Pinter, A. (2006). *Teaching young learners*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press.
- Wells, G. (1981). *Learning to use language*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.

REFLECT/ACT:

Visit one of the following websites and evaluate the site.

Make a list of three interesting points you noted from the site.

- The Child Development Institute
(www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/index.shtml)
- National Association for the Education of Young
Children (www.naeyc.org)

References and further reading

- Gardner, R.C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. London: Edward Arnold.
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