

How Young Learners Learn Language

Andrew Littlejohn



The short history of language teaching to children has undoubtedly been a rather chequered one. Arriving late for the blossoming of language teaching as a defined profession and as an academic discipline, the teaching of additional languages to children has, until comparatively recently, had to deal with sometimes ill-fitting syllabus designs and methodologies. Recent insights into how children learn language, however, are now pointing us in the direction of potentially more fruitful lines of development.

A linguistic syllabus

Perhaps the most obvious mismatch with the teaching of children has come from the legacy that has beset language teaching as a whole: the teaching of Latin and Greek. This emphasised knowledge about a language (grammar) as an appropriate way to become proficient in that language. As language teaching has moved from the teaching of dead languages to the teaching of modern languages, and from the teaching of adults to the teaching of older children, the same underlying model has persisted: an analysis of language, taught in bits to the learners, which they are assumed to eventually combine, accurately and fluently. Even as language teaching moved into the 'communicative revolution' of the 1970s and 1980s, towards an emphasis on the use of language rather than its form, the same model survived in the lists of a 'new grammar': functions, notions, and social scenarios for learners to systematically work through in a planned, controlled manner. In recent years, as language teaching has moved on to even younger learners in primary schools, a model built on language analysis has remained, and in many parts of the world it is the main 'organizing syllabus', albeit now with a layer of child-friendly storylines, topics, games and songs grafted on.

Developments in methodology

Methodologically speaking, the teaching of young learners has also had to deal with many similarly incompatible developments. As the failure of grammar-focussed approaches became apparent in the 1950s, behaviourism, which principally saw language learning as imitation of correct 'habits', provided the methodology of choice to provide rigorous opportunities for highly controlled language practice. This led to the introduction of many task types which are familiar to most teachers today: drills, substitution tables, listen and repeat, patterned dialogues, and so on. Although these were initially developed with adults in mind, it was not long before these devices found their way into the course materials of older children, and, today, they still frequently feature in the teaching of young learners, too.

The seismic shifts in methodology inspired by Communicative Language Teaching from the 1970s-80s onwards introduced many new task types, such as skeleton dialogues, role-plays, information gaps, simulations and so on, which also found their way into teaching materials for school-aged learners. The emphasis in these task types, however, was replication: reproducing in the classroom the kinds of speech events that occur outside the classroom, mainly as a rehearsal for future possible experiences. As such, CLT emphasised an adult 'there and then' perspective, rather than the 'here and now' focus of most children, with a direct consequence for learner motivation and interest.

More radical methodological innovations, also from the late 1970s and 1980s onwards, such as Krashen's ground-breaking Input Hypothesis, suggested a complete break with the 'learning' of linguistic syllabuses in favour of supplying comprehensible input to promote 'acquisition', with the proviso that input should be 'interesting and relevant' to the learners. Although this avoided the 'there and then' problem, the underlying assumption of an adult remained, now one willing to sit waiting for passive absorption of 'comprehensible input' to do its magic, and for language abilities to miraculously 'emerge'. Those teachers who experimented

with Krashen-inspired approaches often found them difficult to implement in the face of restless, energised young learners. As one teacher told me at the time, ‘There simply isn’t enough going on. They’re climbing up the walls!’

The irony of the limitations of comprehensible input methodologies with young learners is that the original impetus for this was actually the study of children’s language development, particularly first language acquisition. Today, it is this same area of research which points us in the direction of a better understanding of how language development in young learners actually happens.

First and second language acquisition

So what do we know about how children acquire language, whether it is their first or subsequent language? As it happens, we know quite a lot and are now able to theorize the conditions that are needed to make language development happen, and to explain why some approaches have only limited success.

The most important element in determining an effective route to language development is to recognise where it occurs. Simply put, it is in the child’s head. Inspired by the ‘Chomskyan Revolution’, which stressed our natural language learning abilities through an in-built ‘language acquisition device’ (LAD), it is now recognised that young children construct grammars themselves, as they subconsciously analyse the ‘language data’ they hear (i.e., the speech of others) to work out underlying rules. Correction, in this view, is mostly irrelevant and unnecessary, as the child’s own transitional language (‘interlanguage’) naturally moves closer to a standard variety. Explicit grammar, in this view, cannot be taught to young children, and any attempt to do this will impede what the LAD requires: exposure to natural language use. Natural language use, for example, is unlikely to involve only using the Present simple lesson after lesson, followed by equally intense exposure to other tenses. Nor is it likely to involve in-depth coverage of vocabulary sets each focussing on a single domain, such as ‘farm animals’ or ‘rooms in a house’. With a focus on meaning, messages and communication, natural language use involves breaching virtually all norms of syllabus selection and sequencing based on analysing language.

Support for this view of child language development, whether of the first or subsequent languages, has also been strengthened by work in developmental psychology, particularly those in the constructivist tradition, which shows how children move through various stages in their cognitive development. The ability to see, focus on and manipulate conscious rules of grammar, or follow controlled patterns based on form, or vocabulary groupings, is liable to be beyond the developmental stage of all but the oldest learners in the primary school age. The child’s attention is likely to be on what language says, not how it works.

Key ingredients for language development

If, as seems to be the case, we must ultimately rely on hidden subconscious processes as children construct their own grammars, we must also consider how we can support that happening. First, we now know that language development needs two main ingredients: exposure and interaction, both in plentiful supply. Exposure means that children need to hear lots of language in natural use, language which aims to communicate, share ideas, knowledge and reactions, however limited the child’s own language abilities are. The second ingredient, interaction, is more than just ‘practice’, and it is important to draw the distinction between the two. Practice, as a concept, principally relates to repeated efforts to do something until you can ‘get it right’. As such, practice is mainly about consciously gaining control over form. Interaction, on the other hand, means that the child does something with the language they are exposed to and reacts to its meaning. Children who are learning their first language rarely ‘practice’ (except in their earliest stages of babbling, but even then this is hardly a conscious decision). Every time a first language learner opens their mouth it is to say something or do something with language. Meaning is paramount.

In short, in first and second language acquisition, children need to be engaged with language use that is plentiful and stimulating. As language teaching has expanded into primary schools, it is the lack of these two essential ingredients – rich exposure and rich interaction – which often accounts for widespread disappointment in what is achieved in language teaching to children. Despite the enormous expenditure and effort put into primary school language teaching, the promised gains frequently fail to materialise, and children become weary of language learning before they have really begun. Twenty minutes a day ‘language showers’ or two or three forty-minute classes a week are almost certainly not an efficient use of time. Equally,

a grammar driven approach, even if buried under child-friendly pictures, games and storylines, is unlikely to provide the context for language acquisition to happen. And ditto for approaches that simply offer songs, games, and puzzles, entertaining though they may be.

As far as creating naturalistic settings for language acquisition to happen is concerned, our current best hope is the development of approaches which involve content-rich or content-integrated language use, and rich opportunities for playing with language – imaginary characters, invented role-playing storylines, acting out events, and so on, with meaning central. These constructivist pedagogies aim to engage children cognitively and emotionally as appropriate to their stage of development. Problem-posing, speculating, discovering, creating, considering, imagining – all those ‘HOTS’ (higher order thinking skills) at the top of Blooms’s well-known pyramid – are our best bet. Such approaches can stimulate rich natural language use and engagement, and provide fertile ground for language development to happen.

Much is made of the ‘younger is better’ argument, and, indeed, younger is better if all the essential ingredients are available. But if these ingredients are not present, or are not in plentiful supply, contemporary thinking will advise us that it is probably better to save our time, effort and money until our learners are older, when they can probably make better use of non-natural, conscious routes to language development. ■

Andrew Littlejohn is a teacher trainer, academic and author. He has written many ELT courses including *Primary Colours* and *Cambridge English for Schools (CUP)* and *First Choice* (Lehrmittelverlag, Switzerland). His website www.AndrewLittlejohn.net provides many free resources for language teachers. You can contact him at: andrew@andrewlittlejohn.net