

CHILDREN LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE

Introduction

Young children are natural language acquirers; they are self-motivated to pick up language without conscious learning, unlike adolescents and adults.

The advantages of beginning early

- Young children are still using their individual, innate language-learning strategies to acquire their home language and soon find they can also use these strategies to pick up English.
- Young children have time to learn through play-like activities. They pick up language by taking part in an activity shared with an adult.
- Young children have more time to fit English into the daily programme. They may have little or no homework and are less stressed by having to achieve set standards.
- Children who have the opportunity to pick up a second language while they are still young appear to use the same innate language-learning strategies throughout life when learning other languages. Picking up third, fourth, or even more languages is easier than picking up a second.
- Young children who acquire language rather than consciously learn it, as older children and adults have to, are more likely to have better pronunciation and feel for the language and culture.

Stages in picking up English

Spoken language comes naturally before reading and writing.

Silent period

When babies learn their home language, there is a ‘silent period’, when they look and listen and communicate through facial expression or gestures before they begin to speak. When young children learn English, there may be a similar ‘silent period’ when communication and understanding may take place before they actually speak any English words.

During this time parents should not force children to take part in spoken dialogue by making them repeat words. Spoken dialogues should be one-sided, the adult’s talk providing useful opportunities for the child to pick up language.

Beginning to talk

After some time, depending on the frequency of English sessions, each child (girls often more quickly than boys) begins to say single words ('cat', 'house') or ready-made short phrases ('What's that?', 'It's my book', 'I can't', 'That's a car', 'Time to go home') in dialogues or as unexpected statements. The child has memorised them, imitating the pronunciation exactly without realising that some may consist of more than one word. This stage continues for some time as the child picks up more language using it as a short cut to dialogue before they are ready to create their own phrases.

Building up English language

Gradually children build up phrases consisting of a single memorised word to which they add words from their vocabulary ('a dog', 'a brown dog', 'a brown and black dog') or a single memorised language to which they add their own input ('That's my chair', 'Time to play'). Depending on the frequency of exposure to English and the quality of experience, children gradually begin to create whole sentences.

Understanding

Understanding is always greater than speaking and young children's ability to comprehend should not be underestimated, as they are used to understanding their home language from a variety of context clues. Though they may not understand everything they hear in their home language, children grasp the gist

Frustration

After the initial novelty of English sessions, some young children become frustrated by their inability to express their thoughts in English. Others want to speak quickly in English as they can in their home language.

Mistakes

Children should not be told they have made a mistake because any correction immediately demotivates. Mistakes may be part of the process of working out grammar rules of English or they may be a fault in pronunciation.

Gender differences

Boys' brains develop differently from girls' and this affects how boys pick up language and use it. Sometimes mixed classes make little provision for boys, who may be overshadowed by girls' natural ability to use language.

Language-learning environments

- Young children need to feel secure and know that there is some obvious reason for using English.
- Activities need to be linked to some interesting everyday activities about which they already know, eg sharing an English picture book, saying a rhyme in English, having an 'English' snack.
- English sessions are fun and interesting, concentrating on concepts children have already understood in their home language. In this way children are not learning two things, a new concept as well as new language, but merely learning the English to talk about something they already know.
- Activities are backed up by specific objects, where possible, as this helps understanding and increases general interest.

Reading

Children who can already read in their home language generally want to find out how to read in English. They already know how to decode words in their home language to get meaning from text and, if not helped to decode in English, may transfer their home language-decoding techniques and end up reading English with the home language accent.

Before they can decode English, young children need to know the 26 alphabet letter names and sounds. As English has 26 letters but on average 44 sounds (in standard English), introducing the remaining sounds is better left until children have more experience in using language and reading,

Parental support

Children need to feel that they are making progress. They need continual encouragement as well as praise for good performance, as any success motivates. Parents are in an ideal position to motivate and so help their children learn, even if they have only basic English themselves and are learning alongside their young children.

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