



Teaching English to ESL young learners: the use of activity-based learning as a teaching strategy

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Abstract- English is undoubtedly a global language and spoken widely throughout the world. The indispensability of learning English by non-native speakers of this language cannot be contested. The active exposure of an ESL (English as a second language) learner to language content during the early years of language acquisition by an English language teacher promotes the learning of a second or foreign language. The ESL programs designed for young learners, usually referring to school-aged kids less than 12 years, help these non-native speakers of English to become comfortable with language use. This is demonstrated through reading comprehension, spoken fluency, and effective writing. The ESL teachers must focus on appropriate language teaching methodologies and strategies which can be effectively incorporated in teaching English as a second language for developing English language competency during early education. The use of practical examples and real-life situations to teach the English language at the primary level makes it usable to students and makes language learning enjoyable. Teaching the second language by incorporating role-plays, songs and worksheets contribute to implicit learning. The use of props, photographs, illustrations, and other real-life contexts enhances acquisition and the students understand better by acting out and by keeping language input simple.

Keywords: ESL, second language teaching, Activity-based learning, English language teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

English is the world's most widely used language. It is spoken as a first language by approximately 350 million people around the world and more than 430 million are speaking it as a second language. This language has official status in over 60 countries and about 150 million people use English fluently as a foreign language (Crystal, 2003).

English as a second or foreign language implies learning and use of the English language by speakers who are non-native speakers of this language. Second language acquisition (SLA) is a conscious process of learning another language other than the First Language (L1) of the learner. The First Language (L1) refers to the language the child is exposed to and learns from birth. It is generally the language of the parents or caregivers, and it is possible to have more than one L1. The Second Language (L2) refers to the language learned after L1 has been acquired. The teaching of English as a second language (TESL) or as a foreign language (TEFL) refers to teaching the English language to students whose mother tongue is not English. These students have different first languages/native languages. An ESL learner implies that this English language learner has already learned and acquired another language, generally the native language, before learning English.

The contrastive analysis hypothesis of second language learning formulated by Robert Lado in 'Linguistics Across Cultures' assumes that the proportion of difficulties that learners will face in the study of English as a second language is determined directly by the degree to which their native language differs from English. In this book, Lado claimed that "those elements which are similar to [the learner's] native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult" (Lado, 1957). The influence of the L1 cannot be negated during the acquisition of L2. The L1 transfer or what is commonly called 'language interference' leads to errors in the acquisition of a second language. This necessitates the use of teaching strategies and learning techniques to address each language skill.

II. INTRODUCING SECOND LANGUAGE; THE YOUNGER THE BETTER

Many SLA theories state that introducing the child early to a foreign language will increase the probability of mastering this language better and gaining proficiency more quickly. The 'Critical Period Hypothesis', popularised by Eric Lenneberg in 1967 for L1 acquisition, has been extended by language theorists on second-language acquisition. However, the topic remains controversial and there are several speculations over the timing of the 'critical period' with respect to SLA, with estimates ranging between 2 and 13 years of age (Lenneberg, 1967). The hypothesis supports a critical age beyond which the child's ability to learn a new language diminishes as they get older. One of the most ambitious researches investigating the role of age in early foreign language learning in the classroom is the Barcelona Age Factor (BAF) project (Munoz, 2006).

While teenagers and adults have to consciously learn a new second language, the young learners have an advantage. They acquire a second language rather effortlessly when exposed to considerable input because they are still capable of using the same innate language-learning strategies which are being utilized in first language acquisition.

Krashen's 'Input Hypothesis' emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input as a prerequisite in SLA. He distinguishes language acquisition and language learning. Acquisition of language is considered a subconscious process, whereas learning a conscious phenomenon. According to this hypothesis, the acquisition process in L2 is the same as L1 acquisition. Language Learning Strategies is defined as "specific actions, behaviours, steps, or techniques — such as seeking out conversation partners or giving oneself encouragement to tackle a difficult language task — used by students to enhance their own learning" (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992).

III. TAPPING THE YOUNG ESL LEARNERS; ACTIVITY ORIENTED TEACHING

Young children learn mainly by 'doing' rather than by conscious learning because they learn more implicitly than older children. While many things are learned using conscious or explicit processing, a great deal is also learned implicitly or without conscious awareness (Reber, 1989).

This requires abundant input and rich interaction in the target language. The best way is to incorporate play-like activities; songs, videos, props, and other fun and interactive elements to keep the students engaged. The acquisition of language by taking part in an activity shared with an adult is comparably easier than rote learning of language vocabulary and patterns.

Also, the informal and playful manner of language exposure makes acquisition enjoyable, for the child is not stressed by having to achieve set standards. No sooner the child realises that proficiency targets need to be met than their motivation wanes. Therefore, a fine balance has to be achieved to foster an enduring enthusiasm for language learning and support for gaining progressive and gradual linguistic proficiency at the same time.

The ESL teacher must focus on everyday interaction in the target language as constant exposure and practice from early on is the best chance of becoming fluent in the second language. Language develops best through interaction, therefore, conversations with other students in the second language and also, regular opportunities for direct contact with native target language speakers, particularly those of their age, are highly motivating.

IV. EFFECTUAL TESL STRATEGIES FOR YOUNG MINDS

➤ ESL and Bilingual methods of teaching children

It implies the use of both, English as well as the learner's native language as a medium of instruction. The ESL teacher can incorporate varied techniques in accordance with the requirements of the target group. The educational materials; oral lectures and written assignments can be provided in a blended mode, here the ESL teacher uses both, English and the student's native language simultaneously for instruction and explanation. However, an alternative approach to bilingual teaching strategy advocates the use of English for all lessons while incorporating the learner's native language translation of vocabulary, grammar, and situational hints to improve language comprehension (Wright, 2010)

➤ Keep the energy moving: Total Physical Response (TPR)

Teaching young learners can often be a challenge, to keep their interest alive and harness the attention span, keep things moving. That's where 'Total Physical Response' comes into play. In a language classroom, this teaching method requires the students to use their bodies in response to foreign language instruction.

An ESL teacher can use TPR by sharing action-focused sentences with language class and demonstrate what they mean. Then have students repeat the same. Have the learners walk around and associate body movements with the language structures that are being taught. The teacher instructs in the target language and the student acts. Not only will the students start to build vocabulary associations naturally, TPR is also a tested formula to fight boredom!

➤ Give me your ear: listening to music in L2

Spoken language comes naturally before reading and writing. The learner needs to know the 26 letters and frequently hear the 44 sounds used in Standard English. Just hearing the target language can help children get an ear for different tones. An effective TESL strategy to teach young learners a foreign language is by listening to music in a second language, playing the song in the background constantly during language teaching will eventually have the child humming and singing the words while performing other language tasks. Music stimulates the senses and promotes language, coordination, interest, and memory. Particularly, songs that appease the young minds should be chosen and played.

➤ Learning by Looking: visual L2 Teaching Materials

Learning a second language requires adequate exposure to the target language and resources that facilitate L2 acquisition. Screen time can be used effectively by making the child watch TV programs; even cartoons for early learners, in English. The age-appropriate short videos contain great visual and auditory content to expose children to another language. The social streaming platform, Netflix has many TV shows for children with the possibility of adding subtitles and swapping languages.

For primary level learners, some cartoons like 'Dora the Explorer' have been specifically designed to help children learn a foreign language. In these types of shows, children are encouraged to talk back to the cartoons. This concept is followed in other interactive educational cartoons and it helps children improve their listening and pronunciation skills.

➤ Weave a Story: use children's literature in English

The teaching of a language undoubtedly focuses on the development of communicative skills that will enable the learners to communicate meaningful utterances in social contexts. Storytelling as a technique in the L2 classroom promotes creative learning, tickles the imagination of the learner, and creates a good learning environment with meaningful input. Stories activate the language acquisition device (LAD) and it is easy for children to induce the language elements from the data provided by the stories (Krashen, 1981).

Methods like TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) can be utilized by an ESL teacher by reading stories aloud in the English language and keeping the learners involved in a variety of post-reading tasks and language activities which can make the story more comprehensible and move them from receptive skills (listening and reading) to productive skills (speaking and writing).

Also, the same stories can be read and re-read to the learners. One, children like listening to stories over and over again; and second, repetition allows them to acquire certain language items and reinforce others unconsciously. Using stories allows teachers to introduce the new vocabulary by exposing children to the language in different contexts, thereby enriching their thinking skills. Also, as noted by Ellis & Brewster, many stories have natural repetition of key vocabulary and structures that helps children remember details and learn to anticipate what is about to happen next in the story (Ellis & Brewster, 2002). The use of audiobooks can also come in handy here.

➤ Props do the trick: real objects elicit vocabulary

Just using linguistic concepts and lecture delivery method to explain grammar rules will be monotonous for a young student classroom. It is best to use real objects to elicit a vocabulary word. It helps to create connections between objects and vocabulary words and reinforces language skills.

While teaching a primary class, one can acknowledge the difference between teaching students the words for fruits by dictation versus showing them the real thing. The use of authentic objects from real life draws attention to those words, making it easier to recall information. Young learners like to explore their

surroundings and this inquisitiveness can be channelized by creating a classroom worth exploring. The ESL teacher can use various props; photographs, posters, receipts, maps, toys, eatables, and objects in nature to create a dynamic language classroom.

➤ Where, when, and how; Situational use of English language

The learners must be able to distinguish the formal and informal use of language and should be able to utilize what is learned in different contexts. The understanding of concrete real-life contexts is essential for meaningful conversations. To help learners to shed inhibitions in language use, they should be initially motivated to use the English language frequently for everyday communication.

A team of two educators in Japan, Will Jasprizza and Richard Graham under the initiative 'Genki English' have conceptualized innovative teaching methods in English-language teaching to elementary second language learners in the classroom setting. They have compiled a list of probable topics from which the ESL teachers can choose and frame activities and manage difficulty levels to suit the target class. Some of the topics include animals, insects, gestures, feelings, eatables, weather, numbers, greetings, colours, clothes, body parts, sports, modes of transport, family members, directions, names of countries, telling the time, etc.

V. ESL HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES

Language acquisition is a continuous process of assimilating new vocabulary and phrases into one's language inventory. Simply listening or studying English language words will not be enough; learners need to use the language to master it.

The ESL teacher should take advantage of practical action-oriented sessions to provide opportunities to students to practice the target language. Activity-based learning adds a kinaesthetic element to the learning process. Also called tactile learning, it is an active learning style in which students carry out physical activities to learn language concepts rather than just listening to a lecture or watching demonstrations. Following are some of the activity-based teaching techniques which can be employed by the language teacher to facilitate tactile learning.

- Treasure hunt - The ESL teacher uses the English language to give instructions, explains directions to find certain objects in the classroom or outside the classroom. This helps to teach movement vocabulary, nature vocabulary, real-object vocabulary, and syntactical patterns of English and has the added advantage of keeping the learners moving and involved.
- Role-playing in the English language - Roleplay adds a dramatic element to language learning, making it enduring and interesting. It is a wonderful way to help students memorize the material and encourage conversational skills. The ESL teacher can make learners act out scenes and situations in the English language. For example, the students can be given different situations like ordering food at a restaurant, making a complaint of a faulty product received, congratulating a friend, etc. By incorporating props and objects, the learners take turns acting out the scene assuming different roles.
- Do as I say - This activity involves instruction in the target language to make students learn by illustration and active participation. For example, in an elementary class, a great way to teach location words like under, over, beside, etc. is by using basic objects that students get to school; a bag, bottle, pencil box, etc. and asking the students to carry out the directions with the objects. The ESL teacher gives directions like, 'Put the bottle on the table', 'put the pencil into the bag', 'keep the bag under the table' or, 'hold the pencil higher than the eraser' etc. and the student carries out the directions given.
- Describing attributes - The activity promotes creative thinking and requires the ESL learner to use English descriptive vocabulary to explain a random object while other classmates try to guess the object from the description given. In another activity, random objects can also be utilized to enhance the writing skills of the learners. The ESL teacher places 10-12 random objects on a table and the students have to write a short story incorporating all or a certain number of the objects. This activity makes the learners use the vocabulary they've learned in everyday life and form grammatically correct sentences.

VI. CONCLUSION

A comprehensive ESL instructional program incorporated during the early years of a child's learning aims to improve knowledge and fluency and make these primary learners proficient in using all the skills of the English language; listening, reading, writing, and speaking. Most importantly, both interlingual and intralingual errors are committed by language learners during the acquisition of L2. The ESL teacher must make sure that the language classroom encourages a culture where failure is just a part of learning. The introduction of second language input to young learners has great potential, but ESL teacher has a pivotal role and can optimize the learning of L2 by using a judicious amalgamation of various language teaching strategies. The language learning goals need to be clearly articulated and should be realistic, taking account of the capability of young children and of the context in which schools and teachers have to operate.

Second language teaching needs to be incorporated in the learner's curriculum from the early years to minimize first language interference errors. Teaching children requires activity and engagement which can be successfully achieved by using ingenious strategies that motivate practical use of the second language. In an effective ESL classroom for young learners, there should be ample language exposure, a lot of movement, repetition of language concepts, and classroom activities that are much like play! The ESL teacher thrives on props, games, and other action-oriented techniques that maximize exposure to the target language in a fun and friendly manner. The language teacher must focus on the creation of an enjoyable atmosphere conducive to learning and devise ways for the learner to practice what they have learned.

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