

Designing Activities for Young Learners in EFL Classrooms

İngilizcenin Yabancı Dil Olarak Öğretildiği Sınıflarda Çocuklara Yönelik Etkinlikler Geliştirmek

İsmail ÇAKIR

Kırıkkale Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, Kırıkkale-TÜRKİYE

ÖZET

Gerekli donanıma sahip olmadan çocuklara yabancı dil öğretmek yabancı dil öğretmenleri açısından oldukça zor bir görevdir. Öğretmenlerin ilgili dersi tam anlamıyla sunabilmeleri için öğrencilerin yaşları, ilgileri, seviyeleri, zekaları, ders araç ve gereçleri, süre ve sınıfın durumu gibi özellikleri gözönünde bulundurmaları gerekmektedir. Bütün bunları dikkate alarak hazırlanan bu çalışma çocuklara yabancı dil öğretirken gerekli olan bilgileri sunarak ders öğretmenine yardımcı olmayı amaçlamaktadır. Her konuda gerekli donanıma sahip olmanın eğitimde hem öğrenci hem de öğretmen açısından çok yararlı olduğu yadsınamaz bir gerçektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yabancı dil öğretimi; çocuklar; etkinlik ve oyunlar; çocuklara ait önemli gerçekler

ABSTRACT

Teaching young learners is quite a hard task for foreign language teachers unless they are equipped with the knowledge appropriate for the subject group. To be able to present the required subject in the classroom adequately, teachers should be able to keep in mind many aspects concerning young learners, such as age, material, interest, level, intelligence, time, and physical conditions in the classroom... etc. Bearing all this in mind, the aim of this article has been to provide necessary information for the EFL teachers so that they can get the utmost feedback from young learners. It is obvious that being knowledgeable in the related field is always of great help to both sides- teachers and learners.

Key words: Teaching foreign languages, young learners; activities and games; crucial facts about young learners

1. Introduction

It is a fact that teaching young learners in Turkey has been a challenge for the teachers in the elementary education since English was added to the curriculum for the fourth graders. Most of the teachers of English graduated from the departments of English Language Teaching of various universities in Turkey inevitably encounter the problems of teaching young learners because most of them have been trained to teach English for general purposes to learners without regarding the levels and age groups. It is widely accepted by teachers that teaching young learners is not like teaching adults as they have some peculiar physical and behavioural characteristics. Therefore, in order to teach them effectively, teachers should be aware of these differences germane to this age level as well as the techniques and activities to be implemented in the classroom. In addition, as it is a demanding and challenging task, young learners need to be provided with an atmosphere which will help to stimulate their imagination and creativity through various activities appropriate to the world they live in. That is to say, to teach a foreign language to young learners appropriately is a hard task for teachers, who will always have to be alert and well equipped in the class.

It is widely accepted that young learners differ from adults or children as they have special characteristics. In her *Young Learners*, Phillips claims:

“The ways children learn a foreign language, and therefore the way to teach it, obviously depend on their developmental stage. It would not be reasonable to ask a child to do a task that demands a sophisticated control of spatial orientation (for example, tracing a route on a map) if he or she not yet developed this skill. On the other hand, beginners of 11 or 12 years of age will not respond well to an activity that they perceive as childish, or well below their intellectual level even if it is linguistically appropriate.”

Keeping all this in mind, it needs to be addressed that the role of foreign language teachers in class is far bigger than that of those teaching other subjects. In designing and

implementing activities foreign language teachers should consider the facts mentioned above.

2. Is It Easy to Teach Young Learners?

It has been assumed that the younger the learners are, the more holistic learners they will be. Philips(2001:5) argues that “younger learners respond to language according to what it does or what they can do with it, rather than treating it as an intellectual game or abstract system. Moreover, they have the advantage of being great mimics, and are often unselfconscious and are usually prepared to enjoy the activities the teacher has prepared for them.” That is, it is easy to maintain high degree of motivation and to make the English class an enjoyable, stimulating experience for such learners. Learners at elementary education have a great capacity to enjoy themselves, which supports the view that when learners enjoy themselves, they are usually absorbed by the activity and want to continue with it. In other words, keeping enjoyment in the class is very positive for language learning, because if learners want to continue with an activity for some time, it will give them more exposure to language input and more chance to practise the language. Associating language with something enjoyable and pleasing leads learner to develop more positive attitudes towards it.

Providing young learners with bodily-kinesthetic activities such as making things, singing action songs, playing games, doing project works, doing hands-on activities is a great help for them to understand the target language due to the fact that they eagerly explore the language to understand through the physical activities. In response to the questions how they learn or remember best, most of the learners at the elementary education specify that they can learn and remember best the things they have worked on (Çakır,2003). It can be stated that the language is closely related to what is happening in the situation, and so learners can get clues about the meaning from the activity which accompanies the language.

When created a suitable atmosphere to learn in the EFL classroom any learner can learn the target language. Thus, creating a psychologically secure setting in the classroom enhances learning no matter how difficult the subject or what level of student is. Learners' feelings should not be underestimated; psychologically speaking, if students are happy and secure, they are more likely to enjoy and benefit from learning without regarding the fact that students have feelings about language learning such as frightened, embarrassed or insecure about learning a new language. The teachers need to be sensitive to pupils' feelings as this may affect their motivation and attitude to learning the language. If they feel at home in the classroom, they are more likely to participate and take risks.

3. How Do They Learn Best?

It needs to be addressed that teaching young learners brings a lot of responsibilities on the shoulders of the teachers in the classroom from designing the materials to implementing them appropriately. Klein (1993:14) attests that since it is almost impossible to cater to the interests of about 25 young individuals, the teacher has to be inventive in selecting interesting activities, and must provide a great variety of them. Bearing all this in mind, foreign language teachers should focus on the fact that young learners as well as teachers need to be motivated to learn. Moon (2000:3) points out that young learners learn a foreign language

- through being motivated. It depends on the teacher's style. If the teacher motivated them they would learn fast or quicker.
- by listening and repeating.
- by imitating the teacher. They want to please the teacher. They feel embarrassed when they make mistakes.
- by doing and interacting with each other in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, through a variety of interesting and fun activities for which they see the purpose.
- through translating sentences into their own language.

Aside from the principles presented above, the use of visuals, meaningful contexts, various activities, games, songs, and technology would make learning more enjoyable and faster because they all appeal to young learners.

3.1. Teaching through visuals

It is widely known that visual imagery is a means of knowing the world that is older than linguistic symbolism. In terms of language learning, apart from young learners most of the learners are keen on learning visually and spatially. In teaching any topic teachers feel that the topic should be supported visually; through big colourful pictures, posters, drawings or flashcards, puppets, toys and real objects or by dramatising the meanings through mime, facial expressions, gestures and so on. The benefits of the use of visuals in classroom are countless.

One of the reasons for teaching through visuals is that young learners learn best by seeing and doing. That is, they have a predominantly visual and kinesthetic learning style. The frequent use of visual materials in the classroom leads learners to guess meanings from contexts by the help of visual clues, which prevent them from getting used to spoon feeding. The use of visual aids abundantly in the classroom makes learning memorable and fun- especially if the pictures are large, colourful and amusing, and the miming is exaggerated and funny. Interesting or entertaining pictures motivate students to respond in ways that more routine teaching aids, such as a textbook or a sentence on the board cannot (Celce-Murcia&Hilles,1988:73). Added to an exciting story, these make the young learners class even more enjoyable and unforgettable. So, the young learners' teachers must be really well prepared at all times, and make sure to have a variety of visual aids and techniques ready before each lesson. In this way, she can provide plenty of support and add emphasis on meaning.

3.2. Teaching in context

Apparently, every learner in learning or practicing either mother tongue or a foreign language appreciates learning through contexts. Contextualized activities facilitate learning any topic as it makes them work out the meanings of unknown language from a

situation or a context. Thus, the unknown language becomes more meaningful when contextualised than when presented in a single sentence having no explanation that helps to make the meaning clear. If the language to be introduced in the classroom is accompanied with visuals along with the contexts, retention would be longer.

3.3. Teaching through activities

The use of various activities in the classroom to teach a foreign language has a great impact on learners. Particularly, young learners would love to learn by means of activities as such kind of attempts encourage them to explore something, which is quite stimulating, motivating and interesting. Types of activities that can be used in the classroom can be a project work, drawing, colouring, cutting out, making things, solving problems, recording information ...etc. The reason behind such activities is that learners learn by doing, by being actively involved in their learning; and it creates opportunities for them to use their imagination and creativity. In conducting these activities learners get involved in the learning process and become aware of learning how to learn, which is quite important for them. The following table lists some of the major activities that can be implemented in the EFL classroom.

- TPR activities
- Listen and do, listen and repeat, listen and draw a route...etc.
- Read and draw
- Problem solving
- Sort it out
- Pairwork/Groupwork
- Find someone who is ...
- Drawing, colouring in, cutting out, making things
- Playing pretend games (drama) with masks, puppets, toys, play dough figures etc.
- Tongue-twisters

- Simple poems
- Flashcards
- Guess the words
- Labelling parts, sticking in pictures
- Project works
- Odd one out
- Colour parsing
- Making posters, advertisements, charts, surveys etc.
- Acting out
- Pelmanism/matching games
- Chinese whispers
- Mime and gesture
- Storytelling
- Cuisenaire rods/silent way techniques
- Finger correction
- Jumbled-up sentences
- Minimal pair pronunciation exercises
- Information –gap activities
- Chants/rhymes for vocabulary, stress and intonation.
- Questionnaires
- Vocabulary jigsaws
- Making puppets, masks,
- Songs...

Adapted from Thornton, 2001; Phillips, 2001.

3.4. Teaching through fun and games

Another key principle in the issue of teaching children is that of attitude and motivation. In this respect, Argondizzo (1992:6) propounds the view that “most children who start foreign language instruction do not have autonomous motivation to learn a foreign language.” Children will learn better if they are motivated and want to do it. Thornton (2001:12) has the following to say on the importance of motivation:

“...some experts go so far as to say that motivation is more important than the learners’ aptitude or the method of teaching employed. One thing teachers are sure of, however, is that fun and games are a must in the English language classroom because they are intrinsically motivating for children and again, because they are part of a child’s natural world: the “here and now” of a child’s life.”

Furthermore, Phillips (2001:79) points out “games in foreign language teaching help students to see learning English enjoyable and rewarding. Playing games in the classroom develops the ability to co-operate, to compete without being aggressive, and to be a good loser”. There are of course many everyday games and puzzle activities that can be adapted to a foreign language learning situation which students will already be familiar with. Playing these games will come naturally to them and make them feel they are in a safe environment where they can venture out and take risks. Moreover, if games are used at the right moment and contain the right clues or challenges, they can provide highly considerable benefit for learners. No matter what sort or how simple it is, there is always some sort of language gain. Some language may be learned by heart as part of a fun activity without the children even being aware of it. In this way, children may be led to discover rules for themselves as a result of pleasant informal activities. Games to be used in the class can be categorised depending on the types such as structure games, vocabulary games, spelling games ...etc. Below is the list of suggested games for young learners.

- Counting games
- Hangman, word chains, tennis, words from words,
- Information gap crosswords vocabulary squares, etc.
- Snakes, Bingo, Scrabble, Monopoly, etc.
- Football, drawing points, stepping stones, climb the tower, etc.
- Competitions
- Puzzles
- Ball Games
- Hide and Seek, Treasure Hunt, Pin the nail on the donkey...etc.
- Pantomime, dancing, role play, do the same... etc.)
- Musical chairs, Freeze, etc.
- Yes/No Games
- Class and Team Games
- I spy, story telling, etc.
- Guessing games.
- Who am I? What is my name?
- Hide and search.
- Write what you see, hear, know...etc.
- Stop me when I make a mistake.
- The same or different.
- Guess how many.
- Rhymes and songs
- Telephone conversations
- Silent film...etc.

Adapted from Thornton, 2001; Phillips,2001.

Songs, rhymes, chants, and musical games are fantastic materials for the language teacher to use with young learners (Çakır, 1999:7). They have the ability to learn

indirectly through such kind of activities. Young learners love exploring and guessing the answers in games, and thus they eagerly use the structure being introduced. In addition, they enjoy acting out scenes from a sketch or dialogue, imitating the voices of the characters. When observed their presentation, it can be witnessed that their pronunciation comes very close the characters they have seen or listened to. Therefore, students, particularly young learners, easily learn very important points unconsciously, which is one of the goals of teaching English to young learners.

4. Conclusion

Teaching young learners is not the same as teaching adults since they have their own peculiarities which also change depending on their age groups. That is to say, an activity that is quite attractive and motivating for 10 and 11-year old learners might not draw the attention of 12 and 13-year olds. While 10 and 11- year old would appreciate game-like activities, those at the age of 12 and 13 prefer activities based on language patterns (Keskil and Cephe,2001). Therefore, it does not seem quite easy to state that teachers can present the target language without regarding the facts peculiar to the subject group. From designing to applying an activity they need to focus on some significant factors. First of all, while creating activities for young learners it is important to make the activity interesting for them. Any activity to be used to teach any point would not always be suitable for them unless it is challenging, purposeful and involve real language use together with visuals, materials, sounds, mime, actions etc. The product at the end of the activity is important in presenting activities for learners. As Phillips mentioned (2001:5) the activities should be simple enough for them to understand what is expected of them. It is especially important to state the aims of a lesson or activity to young learners because learners at that age might not have acquired the expertise and experience sufficiently to workout the aims of a lesson for themselves. For that reason, the teacher or materials should clarify what they are for explicitly by providing prompts which enable learners to understand what the activity is about, and what is expected from them. Furthermore, the aims should be relevant to their cognitive development.

Another important issue in creating activities for young learners is that the activity to be designed should promote learners to get involved in the activity as much as possible. Most of the most appreciated activity types that work well are games, songs, and hands-on activities. It is now very generally accepted that learning becomes more enjoyable and easier when teaching is performed with the participation of learners. Designing activities requiring group or team work would develop learners' self-confidence, and thus language learning will not be a difficult issue to handle. Moreover, they will be stimulated to feel satisfied with their work. It should be kept in mind that young learners will learn better when they feel secure, satisfied, and when the activity offers them enjoyable learning atmosphere in the classroom.

References

- Argondizzo, C. (1992). *Children in Action; A Resource Book for Language Teachers of Young Learners*. Prentice Hall: New York.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publications,
- Celce-Murcia, M&Hilles, S. (1988). *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Çakır, A.. (1999). *Musical Activities for Young Learners of EFL*. The Internet TESL Journal, Vol.V.No.11. <http://www.aitech.ac.jp/>.
- Çakır, İ. (2003). *Designing Supplementary Activities for the Sixth Grade English Course Through the Multiple Intelligences Theory*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation. Ankara.
- Ersöz, A. (1990). *Coursebook Analysis and Design for ELT in Turkish State Schools*. Unpublised Ph. D. Dissertation. Ankara.
- Keskil, G. and Cephe, P. T.(2001) Young and Learner Variables in Learning English. *Modern English Teacher*, vol. 10 .
- Keskil, G. (1999). *English Language Teachers in Turkey: Graduates of Different Departments*. Hacettepe Üniversitesi Eğitim Fakültesi Dergisi. 16-17:70-80.

- Klein, K. (1993) Teaching Young Learners. *English Language Teaching Forum*, vol.31:14
- Moon, J. (2000) *Children Learning English*. Oxford: Macmillan Heinemann.
- Phillips, S. (1997). Steps to Pairwork for Young Learners. *English Teaching Professional.*, issue, 4. 28-30.
- Phillips, S. (2001) *Young Learners*. Hong Kong. Oxford University Press.
- Thornton, M. (2001). *Young Learner's Tool Kit*. Turkey, British Council,
- Vale, D.& Feunteun, A. (2000) *Teaching Children English*: Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.