

Which is the Most Appropriate Strategy for Very Young Language Learners?

By

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Abstract

It is important to know how youngsters acquire a foreign language, which activities and content should be chosen for their age. Hence, choosing the most appropriate activities, method or techniques which will help young learners learn languages better gains significance. This study aimed to obtain the strategies that language teachers use in very young learner classes. 34 language teachers participated in the study and they filled out a questionnaire that asked their opinions about the most frequently used strategies, the most effective ones and their easiness of preparation. Then a semi-structured interview was organized with volunteer 8 teachers. The data were analyzed by using SPSS 17.00 and descriptive statistics were conducted. The results showed that the most frequently used activities, methods or techniques were found effective by the language teachers and these were also easy to prepare.

Keywords: Foreign language, Foreign language teaching activities, foreign language teaching methods, foreign language teaching techniques, very young learners.

1. Introduction

Throughout history foreign language learning has always been a crucial concern and English is accepted as the most widely studied foreign language in the world and the importance given in teaching English as a second or foreign language increased massively (Crystal, 2003; Ellis, 2008; Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Teaching English to youngsters is emerged as a new area of study (Abello-Contesse, 2009; Cheatham & Ro, 2010; Ellis, 2008; Krashen, 1982). It has long been discussed that children learn a foreign language better than adults and this is often used to support the early introduction of foreign language teaching (Cameron, 2003; Crain, 2005; Dekeyser, Alfi-Shabtay & Ravid, 2010; Dominguez & Pessa, 2005; Ellis, 2008; Eyres, 2007; Larson-Hall, 2006; Pinter, 2006; Stern, 1991; Topçuoğlu, 2006). The critical period hypothesis introduced by Lenneberg (1967) puts forward the idea that young children can learn a foreign language effectively before puberty as brain reaches its adult values until puberty and there will be a loss of brain plasticity and its reorganizational capacities (Canbulat & Çayiroğlu Şgören, 2005; Gürsoy, 2011; Pinter, 2006). According to Chomsky, every child was born with a gift of language learning ability so the linguistic progress of a child is natural and automatic (Bongaerts, 2005).

According to Slatterly and Willis (2001) 7–12 years old foreign language learners are called young learners whereas children under 7 are called very young learners. Ersöz (2007) argues that very young learners are 3-6 years old, young learners are 7-9 years old, and 10-12 years olds are older/late young learners. For Reilly and Ward (1997), children between the ages of 3 and 6 who haven't begun elementary school are called very young learners. Very young learners' characteristics are different not only from adolescents or adults but also young learners or late/older young learners (Ersöz, 2007; Harmer, 2007). Very young learners have low concentration span but they are easily excited. Although they have high source of motivation, they learn slowly and forget easily as they have a short memory. They need lots of repetition and revision. They are kinesthetic and energetic whereas their motor skills,

such as using a pen and scissors, are limited. They tend to learn holistically. They enjoy love stories, fantasy, imagination, art, drawing and coloring (Ersöz, 2007). Using thematic units, most common themes for very young learners such as; animals, friends, family, environment, shopping, or units revolving around a storybooks, websites, celebrities, or movies students like can create broader contexts in which to teach language, recycle language from lesson to lesson, and allow students to focus more on content and communication than on language (Angi, 1999; Philips, 2004; Reilly & Ward, 1997).

The method chosen for very young learners should be supported by suitable technique and activities which will attract the attention of small children. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which is related to the real life language activities introduced by Hymes (1974). Language needs to have a function in a social environment rather than a set of grammar rules, so communication should take place to be able to master it (Hymes, 1974). In CLT, contextualization of the target language, effective communication and comprehensible pronunciation are used quite often (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Children interact with other learners so that they can share their language skills with each other in role-plays, games, songs, etc.

Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) aims at creating a communicative environment for the students. Dialogue memorization, drills, repetition, use of minimal pairs and grammar games are the basic audio-lingual activities (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). It shows that dialogues are the key and they are used to present the new topic. Children memorize and act the dialogues, use their mimes and gestures, so they learn the structures using repetition.

Story telling is a widely used method in very young learners' classrooms. Stories are directly related to language and literature, according to Li & Seedhouse (2010), they should definitely be a part of teaching the target language. Stories offer numerous opportunities for children to learn the target language since they have rich vocabulary, surprise, repetition of language, rhymes, metaphors and dialogues (Cameron, 2001). When children are submitted with the appropriate story, they can engage in the activities easily because they can easily combine their thoughts with the story by acquiring the language naturally in a contextualized way (Garvie, 1990).

One of the main methods or sometimes a technique that is used for teaching foreign languages to young learners is Total Physical Response (TPR) which is just like the way children acquire their native language (Asher, 1977). TPR is about speech and action at the same time. According to Larsen-Freeman (2000), learners' role in TPR is to listen and perform what the teacher tells, teacher is the model and the director, native language is used for instruction and observation is used as an assessment tool.

Suggestopedia is a method which claims that music and musical rhythm to learning helps to get a quick conversational proficiency (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Teachers aim at showing their students everyday language. Teachers use authentic materials, bright and colorful posters and pictures about the target language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

It is known that it couldn't always be possible to conduct the same language teaching strategies to children with adults. For teachers besides the effectiveness of language teaching activities, methods or techniques, the easiness of preparation is also important. In this study it is aimed to obtain the language teachers' activity, method or technique preferences in terms of the frequency of using them, their opinions about the effectiveness of them and easiness of their preparation. Therefore the research was designed to find answer to following questions;

- Which activities, methods or techniques do foreign language teachers most frequently use when they teach to very young learners?
- Which activities, methods or techniques do foreign language teachers find effective while teaching to young learners?

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- Which activities, methods or techniques do foreign language teachers find easy to prepare?
- Do foreign language teachers most frequently use the most effective or the most easily prepared activities, methods or techniques in their classes?

2. Methodology

Participants

Thirty four foreign language teachers who teach at private kindergartens in Ankara participated in the study. They were obtained by using purposive convenience sampling.

Instruments

A four section questionnaire was prepared by the researcher. In the first section it was asked about the demographic information about the teachers including their gender, length of service, faculty of graduation, whether received a pedagogical training or not and whether they attended any in service training about teaching foreign languages to young learners. In the second section the teachers were asked about the activities, methods or techniques that they most frequently use. In the third section, the teachers' opinions were asked about the activities, methods or techniques that they found most effective and in the last part they were asked about the activities, methods or techniques which were easiest to prepare. Then face validity of the questionnaire examined through expert opinion. All of the experts are working at university and give teaching foreign languages to young learners. Two of the experts added some more activities. One of them changed three expressions. Lastly, the final form of the questionnaire was given. Then 8 teachers who were given the questionnaire were also interviewed. The interview was based on the usage frequency, the effectiveness and easiness of preparation of the activities, methods or techniques.

Data Collection

First, the preschool administrators were visited and informed about the purpose and the procedure of the designed study. Necessary permission was asked for conducting the questionnaire and interviewing the English teachers. The data was collected from 34 English language teachers, within 6 weeks. The teachers were asked to fill in the general information form and the questionnaire and then a semi structured interview was organized with volunteer 8 teachers. They put forward their opinions about teaching techniques for very young learners. The interview was recorded by the researcher.

Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed by using frequency distribution method via SPSS 17.00 and descriptive statistics were conducted. The recorded interviews were decoded by the researcher.

3. Findings

34 of the teachers were female and they all had 1-5 year teaching experience. 18 of them were faculty of education graduate and 16 were graduated from faculty of literature. 24 of them got pedagogical training and 26 of them attended several in service training such as seminars, conferences about teaching foreign languages to young learners.

All of the teachers said that they always use videos and visuals in teaching. 88% stated that they most frequently use songs and rhymes. 85% mentioned mimes and gestures as they frequently use. The least frequently used activity was finger games with 17% and it was followed by role play technique and drama method.

88% stated that mimes and gestures were the most effective techniques followed by videos and visuals with 85%. 82% of the teachers reported that total physical response technique was the most effective.

Finger games, stories and drama were mentioned as the least effective teaching methods and techniques (23%, 21%, 20%).

82% of the teachers found mimes and gestures, and videos and visuals easy to prepare. They were followed by TPR with 76%. 30% of the teachers found arts and crafts activities easy to prepare. Arts and crafts were followed by drama method (30 %) and story reading (28 %).

When the results shown above were analyzed it could be said that teachers most frequently used videos and visuals (100%) in their classrooms and they also found them one of the most effective ones (85%). Teachers also found mimes and gestures a frequently used technique and they asserted it was the most effective teaching technique. Moreover, mimes and gestures were easy to prepare for them. Teachers found finger games activities the least effective and they didn't use it frequently (23%). They found arts and crafts activities, drama and story reading hard to prepare and they stated that they were not so effective teaching activities, methods or techniques in young learner classes.

Interview with Teachers

A semi structured interview was organized with volunteer 8 kindergarten teachers. The interview could be categorized as teachers' opinions about the activities, methods or techniques they preferred using or didn't prefer using much in their classes. They talked about negative and positive sides of the activities, methods or techniques and evaluated them in terms of their using frequency, effectiveness and easiness of preparation. Sample utterances were as follows;

Teachers' opinions about the techniques they prefer using much in classes

'I'll never give up using pictures and videos in my classroom. Pictures elaborate the class, they are fixed on walls. We can reach them easily and practice on them easily.'

'Videos always attract the attention of little children. They are colorful, full of action. They are for audial, visual and also kinesthetic children.'

'Teachers have the opportunity of reaching many many kinds of videos on the internet. I think videos are effective and I use it frequently, it is easy to find and prepare the most appropriate video for the class.'

'The rhythm, the speech on videos sounds interesting to children. They learn words with correct pronunciation.'

'Matching a song video with gestures results with perfect learning'

'The ideal technique in a class of children who do not know reading and writing is mimes and gestures. You always have it with you on your body so it is easy to apply.'

'In fact I do not use only one technique at a time, they are interrelated with each other. For example, I never use only finger games in class. I use it after I conduct a technique such as TPR and go on with finger games. It makes the topic more understandable'

Teachers' opinions about the techniques they do not prefer much using in classes

'Stories are passive. Children do not want just to sit and listen. Choosing the right story is also important. It should be short and interesting. Small children have limited vocabulary and no grammar rules.'

'Story reading is not just sitting and reading because then it will be hard to attract the attention of children. I add mimes, gestures while reading. I do not use a story alone'.

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‘I can say, for that age group role playing or drama is impossible in language classroom as we can’t achieve giving instruction of role play even in mother tongue’

‘Children do not have enough knowledge, vocabulary, grammar to perform a role play or a drama.’

‘Finger games may sometimes be not applicable for everything, such as teaching colors or vehicles’

4. Limitations

All of the foreign language teachers were female and they all had 1-5 year experience.

5. Results and Suggestions

Teachers used videos and visuals, songs and rhymes and mimes and gestures most frequently in classes and they find mimes and gestures, videos and visuals and total physical response (TPR) most effective. They stated that mimes and gestures, videos and visuals and TPR are the activities, methods or techniques which were easy to prepare. As very young language learners showed characteristic differences from adults it was crucial to choose the correct language teaching method, activities, materials and techniques for them (Bardakçı, 2011; Harmer, 2007; Kampmann & Bowne 2011; Mirici, 2001; Nutbrown, 2006;). For very young learners, the lesson should be prepared listening and speaking skills based. Videos, songs and rhymes are the good examples for them. Grammar teaching must be avoided but the lesson may be exposed to chunks through songs or classroom language. There mustn’t be any reading and writing. (Cameron, 2001; Damar, 2009; Elvin, Maagero & Simonsen 2007; Kalaycıoğlu, 2011; Kalaycıoğlu, Olgan & Seferoğlu 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rodgers 2001; Li & Seedhouse, 2010;). It should be kept in mind that for ages 5–7, keeping activities around 5 and 10 minutes long will be better for the learning process (Scott & Ytreberg cited in Shin 2010).

Teachers used mimes and gestures mostly and they found this technique effective. Mimes and gestures appeared in various shapes such as; using hand gestures, facial expressions, pantomime, body movements. They could either mime or symbolize something and they truly helped the learners to infer the meaning of the verbal, providing that they were unambiguous and easy to understand (Tellier, 2004).

Songs could be used as a valuable teaching and learning tool as songs help learners improve their listening skills and pronunciation (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2006). They also led to teaching vocabulary and sentence structures. The most important benefit to using songs in the classroom was that they were enjoyable. According to Milington (2011) despite its advantages, simply singing songs would not teach learners how to communicate in another language. This might be reason why nearly half of the teachers found songs hard to prepare although they believed it was an effective tool and used it in the classes. In such cases, adapting existing children’s songs was one way that teachers could use to expand their repertoire of songs.

Total physical response (TPR) was a technique which was built around the coordination of speech and action (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As young children didn’t know reading and writing they learned through activities. A TPR class is full of actions which appealed to those ‘kinesthetic’ little children. Moreover young learners could hear the new vocabulary in a meaningful context and responded nonverbally first (Pinter, 2006). When these were considered cumulatively TPR was said to be one of the most suitable teaching techniques for young learners and teachers preferred using them frequently in their classes.

Finger games were not very frequently used in classes and most teachers didn’t find them as an effective technique. However, 50% teachers found finger games as an easy technique for preparing. It could be

concluded that even though teachers found this technique easy to prepare, they didn't use it so frequently because they didn't believe in its effectiveness.

For language teachers, arts and crafts activities, drama and story-telling techniques were hard to prepare and they also asserted that they were not as effective as mimes and gestures or videos and visuals. Although they found arts and crafts activities hard to prepare half of them believed the effectiveness of it and 58% used them frequently in their classes. Crafts activities were valuable in giving comprehensible language input as children listened to instructions in order to complete an activity (Reilley & Ward, 1997). Children enjoyed free painting, cutting, sticking as these all developed their independence. Teachers might not have enough time or materials to make things to show an example to the children beforehand. Teachers sometimes needed more materials than needed in case a child made a mistake. There should be enough materials such as scissors, glue, colored papers, boxes, brushes, pencils, crayons etc. This might be the reason why teachers found arts and crafts activities hard to prepare. Otherwise they would use it in their classes more often as they believed how effective the technique was. While children performing arts and crafts activities as there was no specific language being taught, the teacher could go round and ask children questions in English about their painting such as 'Who is this?', 'What color is it?' or 'What is this?'. While children worked independently, they learned a foreign language. When teachers and students provided with these necessary materials arts and crafts activities could be inserted as teachers believed in its effectiveness in learning a foreign language.

Drama was considered as a very powerful method in language classrooms (Harmer, 2007). However, for language teachers drama was the least frequently used method and teachers didn't find it as an effective way of teaching. Moreover they found drama activities hard to prepare. There might be some constrictions for teachers to use drama in their classes. Firstly, they might have space problem to apply drama activities. If the class was small and tables, chairs and other equipment occupied large areas, there might be some difficulties. Secondly, some children might show shy behavior which made drama activities less favorable for them. Teachers might have trouble with such children. Thirdly, younger children found group works or whole class activities more difficult than older children did (Philips, 1993). For the children with limited knowledge of grammar and vocabulary it might be difficult for teachers to organize drama activities. It might be stressful to give instruction to very young learners in a foreign language. If the application of drama activities was hard for teachers and if they didn't find it as an effective teaching technique they might prefer replacing it with other teaching activities, methods or techniques.

Although story telling was known to be one of the most frequently used methods (Reilly & Ward, 1997) teachers didn't prefer using it much in young learner classes. Firstly, it should be kept in mind that English was the foreign language of Turkish children it was not their second language so there should be English story books which were specially prepared for Turkish children reflecting their culture and the books should be easy to understand. If there were enough satisfactory materials particularly prepared for children who were learning a foreign language, teachers would use that technique for their pre literate children. Language teachers were also talented and educated enough to elaborate the stories with visual aids, dramatic tone of voice, mimicry or gestures to bring the story alive.

Role playing was reported to be as an effective technique by more than half of the teachers but it was not found easy to prepare and it was not used frequently in classes. The difficulty of preparation could not be the reason of using role playing seldom in classes because during the interview teachers stated that as their children didn't have enough reserve of grammar and vocabulary in foreign language it was not very easy for them to perform a role in class. Similar problems, such as enough space, shy children, working in groups or giving instruction in the application of drama appear in role playing also. In such case, the solution was that teachers might alter using role play and use effective and easily prepared techniques to make children learn languages better.

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To sum up, teachers preferred the activities, methods or techniques which were most appropriate to their learners. Teachers believed the effectiveness of the chosen techniques and they found most of them easy to prepare. They gave priority to the techniques which they found effective even though they were not very easy to prepare.

According to the findings above, following suggestions can be made;

- Language teachers should be equipped well with materials, such as stationary, toys, puppets.
- CD players and DVD players should be placed in young learner classes.
- Language classrooms should be organized well enough for drama, games and role playing activities.
- The teachers should be provided with more seminars which inform them about teaching strategies to very young learners.
- Easier story books in foreign language which will reflect Turkish culture should be written by Turkish writers.

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