

HOW TO TEACH ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
FOR CHILDREN IN KINDERGARTEN

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HOW TO TEACH ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE
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Abstract

With globalization and English becoming the world's common language, more and more children are encouraged to study English as early as possible. There even exist some kindergartens which offer English classes to children. But there is a lack of scientific teaching method and there are some misconceptions about them. As a graduate student majoring in English education and mother of a newborn, the author focuses on practical English teaching methods for Chinese kindergarteners, physical surroundings, and related issues. The English Foreign Language (from here on EFL) learner's native language proficiency; music as teaching tool combined with Total Physical Response (from here on TPR); flashcards; games as an efficient teaching tool; a relaxing setting; and the characteristics of a qualified teacher will be discussed in this paper to correct some general misconceptions.

Keywords: flashcards, games, learning environment, teacher characteristics, TPR.

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Chapter I Introduction

With globalization English is becoming the world's common language and an increasing number of people think that learning English as a second language is very important for practical needs. In general, people think that it is easier for children to learn a second language than for adults. Many children nowadays are encouraged by their parents and society at large to spend as much time as possible learning English. More and more parents want their children to start learning a foreign language (usually English) from as early as kindergarten. In China, many kindergartens offer this possibility. It is a fact that children are starting English lessons at an increasingly early age. More than half of the teachers surveyed said pupils at their school started learning English at age 6 or younger (Bloom, 2012). Bilingual kindergarten schools, which are generally privately owned, are popular among parents. In addition, many children are enrolled in after-school programs for the purpose of learning English. As a matter of fact, English test scores are valued more than Chinese scores and parents and teachers are shifting their emphasis to have their children concentrate more on learning English than on their native language. Today, Chinese children are taught English beginning with kindergarten, so it is important to continually gain new insights in how to improve and foster the English learning process for children. However, teaching children English is not an easy job. It is a unique experience that is both challenging and fun. Becoming aware, accessing, and applying new and varying practical methods in teaching English for children will benefit both teachers and children.

Statement of the Problem

The problem to be addressed in this study is, "How to teach English as a second language for children in kindergarten".

Definition of Terms

TPR: TPR is short for Total Physical Response. It is a language teaching method developed by James Asher. This method is an example of the comprehension approach to language teaching. The strategy of total physical response is to have the students listen to a command or short narration in a foreign language and simultaneously act out the instructions with a corresponding physical action. (Asher, 1969)

Purpose of the Study

In this rapidly globalizing world, it is essential for children to learn English at an early age. Parents and teachers alike understand that English serves as an invaluable asset for their children as it opens a door to children's future career opportunities. In addition, being bilingual will broaden their horizons by allowing them to participate and promote their merits globally. Mattock, Polka, Pvachew and Krehm (2009) say that "the challenges of acquiring two languages simultaneously also promote linguistic or cognitive skills that have a global positive impact" (p 241). It explains why nonnative English speaking parents want their children to learn English. Learning a second language at an early age is not just beneficial for a child's development but also for their future prospects.

Preschoolers are just at the right age to begin learning basic English principles. Children have an advantage over adults because they can rapidly pick up new words simply by hearing conversations around them. So there is an advantage for children to begin learning a second language as early as possible. Although children may seem to be more interested in playing and socializing with their friends in their native language, teachers can incorporate learning into these activities as well.

Even though there are many published articles about early education, the research in second language acquisition in early childhood education is still a new area and researchers continue to find new and exciting information in this field. Nonetheless, it is commonly accepted by teachers and parents that early education in second language acquisition is beneficial for children. Adoption of scientifically-backed teaching methods on a large scale will improve teaching efficiency and overall quality of education for children. However, because early education is still a new area that requires more research in order to fully understand its impact on a person, scientifically backed methods for teaching are less commonly known and practiced in nonnative English-speaking countries, and therefore such methods are not widely adopted in countries like China. This paper will provide a number of examples of how to utilize scientific research and proven resources to improve English education for children in kindergarten.

Significance of the Study

English education for children has been developing only in the past decades in China so there is still a lack of largescale adoption of scientific teaching methods in early English education. Such lack is not only a disadvantage appropriate teaching and, therefore, for a child's English proficiency improvement, but may result also in the decrease of a child's interest in learning. There are many publications that focus on making learning fun for children. Gaining insight in various scientifically backed methods and incorporating these into the English classrooms will help improve English teaching for children.

Methodology

My seminar paper is mainly based on library research. It was conducted in and through the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville using the UW-Search tool. Searches of the literature were conducted via the Internet through JSTOR, Project Muse and Worldcat as

the primary sources of information. Key search topics included "Teaching for children", "English teaching to children", "EFL". Since the research focuses mainly on English teaching methods for Chinese children in kindergarten, some practical methods turn out to be effective with examples from a famous English training institution, such as EF Education First, and will be considered as a primary material in this paper. The literature review was conducted with articles focusing on scientifically backed methods of how to teach English to children by introducing practices and theories. My research will introduce some theories on international scientifically backed language teaching methods and language acquisition, as well as some practical teaching methods. The conclusion offers several practical ideas concerning characteristics a good English teacher at the kindergarten level should have. This is offered with the hope to help others improve their teaching efficiency.

Chapter II Review of Literature

Learn your native language well to accelerate the acquisition of English

An ongoing trend in kindergartens in China is to teach children English only by native speakers. It is thought that creating a complete English speaking environment in the classroom enhances English language acquisition. This is promoted by the kindergarten as a so-called advantage and as an attraction for parents. “Many teachers believe that teaching mainly in English is the only way to help them learn English quickly” (Shin, 2010, p.19).

We can apply Shin’s research findings to children of immigrants and to children with non-native English-speaking parents as well because they share significant similarities. In the United States of America (from here on USA), children of immigrants are typically at the novice level of English. Since these children live in the USA and are educated in an ESL-environment, they are required to master English as soon as possible and may have to become acquainted with the non-ESL English school texts. These text requirements may also influence children’s parents to focus only on English to maximize the amount of time spent on learning English so that they can live to be a productive member of society in America. They are often sent to an English-only kindergarten. This however may not be an unmitigated advantage for children of immigrants to foster their English skills because these English-only schools are not taking advantage of the child's native language to help them learn and understand English. “Just as art, music, and drama are alternative means of expressing one’s meanings and can contribute to developing literacy skills in English, immigrant children’s native languages are a valuable resource and can facilitate acquisition of English if they are actively validated and used” (Shin, 2010, p 19). Therefore, a complete English environment for schools may not be the best practice for kindergarteners; as Shin points out using a child’s native language to learn English will be beneficial if it is used correctly. Shin also wrote,

“as the basic of language acquisition, the native language makes a great role in second language learning and can help to accelerate primary-age children’s acquisition of English literature”. So there is an advantage to make use of children’s native language when teaching English. That is to say, for the children in kindergartens in China, Chinese teachers can work together with foreign teachers in the classroom to make full use of Chinese to help their students to understand English better – thus enhancing students interests in English. Immigrant children as the newcomer English learners are better off to be sent to kindergartens where they are taught not only in English, but also in their native language. They should also be encouraged to spent time to continue learning their native language at home.

The native language will not hinder the development of a child’s second language acquisition, but when learned and used at the same time, it can be a powerful tool to help accelerate the acquisition of English. There have been experiments documenting additional benefits of using native language for teaching English (Lugo-Neris, Jackson, Goldstein, 2010). So, as an English teacher in kindergarten, do not hesitate to speak the native language in the class room when children do not understand the English material. For example, when you guide your students to participate in a game and explain the rules to them, if there is any difficulty in understanding these, it will hinder participation. You can also use some simple Chinese words to explain the rules again to your students.

Making use of Music

Everybody likes songs, especially children. There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says “Interests are the best teachers for children”. That is to say, if you want to be a good teacher in kindergarten, the most important point is to know and incorporate the mental characteristic and developmental progress of children at this primary age. Music is a universal language and children

respond very strongly to it, as Shin points out “just as art, music, and drama are alternative means of expressing one’s meanings and can contribute to developing literacy skills in English” (p 19). Songs for children have simple melodies and repeat words, which fosters the recognition principle for children, such as the alphabet, colors, animals and body-parts; making incorporation of songs in the curriculum useful for children and language acquisition. Also, singing together with other children, a teacher, or another adult is a joy for children. Children will not consider this learning process as learning more words and phrases traditionally, but considers it a music lesson. Since the song texts are in English, it is easy for children to learn new words. Children will increase their vocabulary and pronunciation skills in English during English music lessons. “Children are encouraged but never stressed to participate in the English learning activities, for that children may feel comfortable performing as a part of a group than to respond individual” (Mitakidou, 1997, p 168). When teaching or singing English songs together with others, it will relax the children and they will be more open to practice speaking English. This type of teaching makes the language learning environment relaxed with less stress. It also encourages children to participate in group tasks with each other; which contributes to language acquisition. This method also works well especially for children who are sensitive and shy. But how does making full use of music effectively develop children’ English acquisition?

Making use of the TPR approach during music lesson

Although children can acquire English easier than adults, they are more difficult to teach because they can get distracted easily by their surroundings. As Asher said “no single component could account for the accelerated learning.” The Total Physical Response approach (TPR), introduced by Asher states that “the intact pattern of the motor act seemed to be necessary for the achievement of a high level of listening fluency” (2006, p 16). In other words, exercises that

incorporates repetition of words and sentences along with physical activity promotes fluency. This comes into play especially when teaching children English with music and movements corresponding to the text. This popular method is used to make learning fun as it also maintains the children's full attention during the remainder of the activity. One example of a song that uses TPR quite well is the English song *Head and Shoulders*:

Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes,

Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes,

Eyes and ears and mouth and nose,

Head, shoulders, knees and toes, knees and toes!

The Head and Shoulders activity makes full use of the TPR. By corresponding the words in the song with the body parts, it allows children to directly comprehend the song's words because the activity requires children to point to the correlating body part as they sing along. For example, when singing the word "head" children are meant to point to their head, and so on. After practicing once, encourage the children to point to the correct body parts as the song plays more quickly. The more they repeat the exercise; the quicker they will react to point to the body parts in the song. This indicates that the children understand the meaning of the words in the song while having fun doing so. The TPR method is not only effective for children in comprehending English words, but it also reinforces new words, therefore aiding them in English acquisition. As Asher (1969) said "acknowledging understanding with a physical movement [which] often shows a complex comprehension of the target language." Compared to traditional teaching methods that translate the English word into children's songs, which can be boring and outside of children's acquisition ability, teaching songs with the TPR approach will "produces rapid, non-stressful learning to

understand a second language” and will make “their comprehension was accelerated far beyond students who tried to learn with translation methods” (Asher).

Making use of flashcards

All songs are made up of melody and lyrics. In children’s songs, lyrics generally contain words that relate to objects. They are known as sight words. Sight words are commonly used words that young children are encouraged to remember by sight and they account for a large percentage of the words children need to master at the pre-primary school age. So it is important to teach children to recognize them automatically. Transitioning acquired words learned from songs for use in literacy requires additional methods. Kupzyk, Daly, and Andersen (2011) demonstrate the effective use of flash cards for English lessons, “Flash cards are a convenient, simple, and popular format for presenting discrete stimulus items (e.g., sight words) during discrimination training” (p 781). Flash cards for children often not only contain words but also the direct image of the words. So kindergarten teachers can make full use of flash cards during music lessons to aid in reinforcing words that are learned through songs. For example, if the song lyrics contains words about animals, the use of animal-flash cards will provide additional aid for children to associate animals with the English words that are introduced in the song; the same applies for the alphabet, colors, and other topics.

Flash cards make it easier for the children to understand the meaning and spelling of the discrete word, so it is a good approach that can be used in kindergarten.

Combining game playing with teaching

There is an ancient Chinese proverb that says, “one will learn better if he or she plays harder.” In general, children like playing more than rote learning. They are more interested in activities such as card games, role playing, etc. As Scott and Atterberg (1990) describe it, “their

own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times.” (p 2) Children also tend to “have short attention spans since they are more linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible”. (Kang Shin, 2006, p 2). Young learners learn differently from adult learners so teaching children English is different from teaching adults. Children get bored easily; losing interest after a short period of time. In order to keep them concentrated on English learning, it is necessary to make use of interactive exercises.

For a kindergarten teacher, knowledge is the foundation of their profession, but the most important and essential factor in being a good teacher is the ability of making use of interactive methods to convey “knowledge” in a way that children will understand – as how Sandie (2014) succinctly states, “planning for child-initiated, free play should be part of our early years English programm” (p 10). How then can we combine playing games with teaching?

Firstly, make use of educational tools. In order to keep children concentrated on English learning, it is necessary to make use of activities with objects that will keep them interested, such as toys, models, or other objects in English class. These objects can be used as the props in games, while some can be used as an award for children in group activities. All of these teaching materials can be made to function as task-based materials, which can support the communicative language teaching class, where comprehension and communication make sense in learning (Larsen and Freeman, 2010, p 89).

Secondly, it is very important for teachers to plan the games or activities in a way that makes language class enjoyable. There are many aspects that need to be considered and addressed when preparing a game. First, it is better to organize more group activities than individual activities. This forces children to interact with other students. As Mitakidou (1997) said “children may feel more comfortable performing as a part of a group than to respond individual”(p 168). For example,

when you plan role playing games for the class, make sure that all the children have a role in the game and that they can be divided into groups to compete. For a forty to forty-five-minute group activity, the following method can be used as a reference:

Step1: Lead the students to stand in a row.

Step2: Inform them of the principle of the [number] game, which is that everyone should quickly speak out the number higher than the former in accordance with the sequence. The student who makes a mistake is out of the game.

Step3: Repeat and practice as many times as there are students lined up and see who performs best.

For children, the advantage of the learning through games is that while it helps them stay focused and follow directions by learning the rules of the game, it also helps children be involved throughout the game. Games can be repeated to give every student a chance to practice, in the case above, their English numbers.

This method is used in famous institutions like EF Education First, whose slogan is “Making Entertainment A Medium of Education.” This school has a class named “Kids Club,” which allows students to practice English through simulating a real-life language environment. These methods have proven to foster a strong foundation of children’s English skills.

Creating a relaxed English learning environment in the classroom

Although usually children thoroughly enjoy English class, kindergarten children in China typically have English class only two times a week. For children, this may not provide enough adequate English exercises to properly retain all the English they had learned throughout the week. To address this potential problem, parents and teachers should encourage children to use English whenever possible.

International amusement parks are generally thought of as tourist destinations. Although these places are not ideal places for children to learn English, it is possible to improve a person's English through the interaction with the environment. For example, since most international amusement parks have signs in English, this can be a place for children to practice their English language skills in an outside setting. A different way to look at it is somewhat like an English activity center, which “makes the language environment relaxed and low-stressed and also makes the children do some group task with each other, which both contribute to the language acquisition” (Shin, 2010, p 16). The point is, to find and create opportunities where teaching and using English are possible.

In real life we find that children receive toys, which can be useful in English learning as some of these toys have English instructions only and in order to properly use the toys, children have to fully use their English skills to understand the instructions. One example is Legos. Lego sets provide English instructions for children to read and understand in order to build the any particular product properly. The more instructions children understand, the better their English proficiency and retention will be.

Creating a relaxed setting can help children improve English retention and foster their English skills. In the classroom, we can create such areas, where all kinds of games, materials, and decorations are in English. English learning areas “not only provides access to English outside of the specific English lessons themselves, but also helps to integrate English into the children’s pre-primary day” (Sandie, p 257). A productive learning environment pushes children to learn English on their own and provides an effective way for children in kindergarten to use English more often throughout the day.

Desirable characteristics in English teachers who teach children

Teaching English to children is not an easy job, however there are ways to make teaching more efficient and less stressful. Below is a compellation of characteristics needed to be a good English teacher in kindergarten. It is the easiest and most important method.

- Must be kind and patient.
- Must love children. When you love children, you will try your best to give them appropriate care and knowledge.
- Must be energetic.
- Must pay attention to individual differences.
- Must encourage, encourage, and encourage. Every child needs encouragement to have more confidence, which will help them to study happier and more successfully.
- Must know the techniques of teaching.
- Must respect children as humans.

Summary

In summary, there are many effective methods that can be applied to an English class for kindergarten students. One misconception many parents and teachers may have is that a complete English class environment is the best choice for the children. This is incorrect because explaining and teaching English in a child's native language at times is proven to be extremely useful. As an English teacher in kindergarten, do not hesitate to make use of the native language to help accelerate children's acquisition of English. In addition, making full use of music, including songs, will help children learn new words and enhance their listening skills. Also remember to let children learn songs with scientifically backed methods. For example, utilize the Total Physical Response method for specific lessons and use flash cards to aid children in reinforcing the learned English vocabulary. Games as group activities are also effective and

should be included in English classes. The best way for teaching children is to merge playing with learning. As there is often a limited amount of time throughout the week for English learning, it will be advantageous to create relaxed English learning areas in the classroom. This can help children participate more in English learning activities as their surroundings are designed to calm them while also encouraging children to use English. Last but not the least, the teacher should also know the characteristics of an effective language teacher and try their best to model their temperament to meet the characteristics of this ideal teacher.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

In regards to language acquisition, children in kindergarten, as very young learners of English, are much different than adult learners of English. We should take this seriously and have more research in this area. The methods in this paper come from a body of scientific research and as well from real life experiences from teachers. Practice and research studies are the only standard to check and see whether new technologies or new educational methods are effective. Therefore, I think, as an English teacher in kindergarten, it is also important to always look for new ways on how to improve education. Children are the future after all. Lastly, I recommend to educators to share their ideas and methods to other educators in search of finding ways to improve education.

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