

English as a Second Language in Kindergarten

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This article looks at the theory and the practical applications of a kindergarten teacher in teaching non-English-speaking students English in their first year at school. The pedagogical approach used offers an interplay between the teacher and learner. It provides the reader with instructional strategies that inculcates meaningful learning activities leading to long term retention rather than the reliance on rote learning methodology.

Introduction

“From the first day, non English speaking Kindergarten children enter the English speaking classroom; they get a big jolt and realize they are in the real world: a world where their mums and dads are not with them to talk to the adult present, the teacher. For these 4-5 year olds their whole world has turned upside down as they listen to a language unknown to them. Their frustration is evident as they cry and scream, and try as they might, cannot understand the teacher who is talking to them in English. These circumstances may be familiar to any person in the world, who travels to a foreign country, gets lost and then finds a native who, in his/her best way tries to explain the correct way. The foreigner will be lost, unless he has a companion who interprets or he has a translation book.”

Just like the foreign tourist needs strategies to assist their understanding, so do the new kindergarteners. However, not only do they need translators, but more importantly, a teacher with the necessary skills to quickly engage the students to speak and learn English.

How do children learn to become independent English speakers? What must one do to help start the learning process?

Teaching English to Second Language Learners

Experts have undertaken tremendous studies which show that learning a foreign language at an early age is beneficial if the learning environment is rich and full of opportunities that are easily accessible (Brinton & Celce-Murcia, 2014). According to the United States National Institute of Health, this is a critical “period of time during which the brain is optimally capable of acquiring a specific ability, provided that appropriate environmental stimuli are present.” (Jeffery, 2008) This goes on to show that provided the teacher motivates students in the right direction children will easily learn a new language. The right stimulation will charge the brain and children will begin to understand and learn a new language. The challenges on the other hand of teaching English to English as a Second Language (EAL) students according to the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum (NALDIC, 2011) are that there is continued use of the native tongue. There is a period of silence when children withdraw and do not speak at all and then there is repetition of single words and then small phrases of acquired English language. When these challenges arise then the teacher needs to make sure

that she continues to practice good pedagogies and ensure that the children learn English. The way in which children learn a new language is through a number of key instructional strategies (British Council, 2016).

Key strategies used in schools of note include modelling how to speak clearly, repetition of keywords and phrases, role play to enforce language use, cooperative learning structures, the use of visuals to clarify vocabulary, narrating stories and singing songs.

Let me briefly explain each strategy:

1. Modelling

When a teacher speaks he/she needs to articulate clearly and should look at the child when speaking. When second language speakers speak another language, it is as if they are “breaking their voices”; their voices are heavy, course and sound very different to the ears. To make sure they get used to speaking in English the teacher needs to make sure that the children are not embarrassed. A teacher will need to say the word(s) many times so that the child gets used to saying it. The ways to model according to Twomey, a speech-language pathologist, is by expansion, self-talk, parallel talk and to recast sentences (Twomey, 2009). These are explained as follows:

- *Expansion*: is when a child says “him good” the teacher corrects and expands by saying “he is good”. Many EAL speakers tend to directly translate sentences from their native language to English and they change the parts of speech; they drop verbs and change pronouns. Correcting their parts of speech will increase their vocabulary and develop it.
- *Self-talk*: is when an adult talks about the actions he/she is carrying out. In class for example, if a teacher is demonstrating how to draw a mouse, the teacher will explicitly say, “I am going to draw a mouse; first I will draw a straight line on the paper then I will draw a curve for its body, next I will draw a circle and draw an eye and finally I will draw a curved line for its tail.” In this way, the children get to know what the adult is doing and why and when they draw, they will be able to talk about it.
- *Parallel talk*: is when a child is playing silently, and the teacher gives a commentary for the play. For example, if the child is playing with play dough and the teacher says “you are playing with green playdough. You can make a green ball and take some red play dough and make a red bat.” This way the child gets an understanding of what he is playing with and what he is making. The importance of this is that when he/she starts to speak English the child will have the vocabulary and will be able to relate words with his actions.
- *Recast sentences*: This is when a child e.g., is playing with building blocks and he/she brings the blocks to show the teacher and says, “look!” you can ask “What am I looking at?” or “what did you make?” to encourage the child to talk and at least give a one-word answer.

An Anecdotal View: How modeling works in my classroom

The first time Sara spoke, the word “bathroom” sounded like an alien. It took me some time before I realized that Sara had spoken. So, I looked at her and said very softly and clearly, “bathroom”. She repeated it and we practiced some more before she became comfortable saying the word. Sara then picked the word “water” and again it was heavily accented, and she

needed a lot of practice to say it correctly. Gradually, as Sara started using new vocabulary her vocal cords started to get used to new words. Singing the songs in class also became easier for her and her voice toned down considerably. Now Sara, is confident to speak in English and when she does speak English, she can name all the primary colours, count and knows the 3 basic shapes (triangle, square, and circle).

In class, I tend to use a combination of expansion, self-talk, parallel talk and recast sentences. I always expand children's sentences when they change the pronouns. The children nearly always tend to change their pronouns and the most common pronoun used is 'he'. The girls are almost always given masculine pronouns and it is not only the boys, but the girls too tend to use 'he' broadly.

2. Repetition

When a child comes to school with no English language the teacher should repeat words. Research concludes that repetition works due to the connection of the neurons in the brain to the synapses. These neurons let communication through "action potentials or electrical signals" (Hecker & Humphrey, 2013). The synapses have neurotransmitters which are passed between the neurons that allow signals to pass through. These synapses are weak and will not pass-through neurons thus as a child learns a new word in a foreign language, he/she will not retain it easily. Therefore, repeating the words will help these neurons strengthen and so the child will begin to retain words. Repetition activities should be undertaken daily and possibly at the same time. In this way retention is better and children begin to get used to the words and eventually know how to say them.

An Anecdotal View: How Repetition works in my classroom

The children coming to school need to know the days of the week and the months of the year among other facts. For example, the names of colours, shapes, animals, plants etc. To teach the days of the year I name the days of the week, and I have placed the names of the week on a wall where I can easily move a pointer to show: today is...., tomorrow will be...; and yesterday was...: I also name the months of the year. Eventually when I ask the children "Today is?" the children do respond. The child's answer might not be correct but just because they can answer the question and say the names tells me that repetition works, they can name the days of the week and eventually as they start to realize how time works, they will know which day it truly is.

3. Role Play

Role play is encouraged in language acquisition as it helps children develop language naturally and realistically. When a child is told to role play an adult (eg. a girl role plays her mother); the girl can comfortably learn words which a mother uses in her everyday life. The girl can act as if her mummy is on the phone and she will be able to talk to her mummy's friend without any restrictions. When the conversation is going on the teacher can intervene to correct the child's mistakes or to provide vocabulary for easy conversations. The three key role play categories are:

- *Real life role play*: students role play situations which occur in real life like they can act like shoppers in a shopping mall or customers in a restaurant

- *Direct/indirect experience role play*: students play parts which they personally experienced or might not have experienced for example, doctors, firefighters, mechanics and race car drivers
- *Imaginative/fantasy role play*: students act like characters from storybooks and the children talk like the animals or the people from the storybooks

All these role plays develop language as they add rich vocabulary to the non-existent or limited English language.

An Anecdotal View: How role play works in my classroom

For role play to be successful in my classroom I become the facilitator, where I facilitate the students by providing them with words to complete the role play. At times, I am the spectator so that students can see me and get the confidence to talk, even if they say one word or repeat what their peer has said. I have also been the participant and have acted together with the children so that the spectators can imitate me when it is their turn to participate in the play.

To aid role play I provide the students with targeted props for the role play area of my classroom. The students might be sellers and I am the customer where I will ask the children to sell me vegetables or food. Sometimes the students act like bakers and bake me bread or cupcakes and I always pretend to buy them and then pretend to eat them.

4. Co-operative Learning Structures

Cooperative learning structures are a rich way to help expand the English language. A study carried out by Grundman, (Grundman, 2002) concludes that having cooperative structures in place in Kindergarten classes greatly improves language in young children. Cooperation and collaboration are very difficult concepts for young children to master and even though they may not want to pair up or share resources with other students, continuing to practice and offering incentives helps build their relationships. The first time the students were asked to complete an assignment in small groups (2-3 students), I was disappointed by their response. They experienced difficulty sharing materials and working cooperatively to accomplish the task. However, if students are repeatedly told to collaborate and cooperate, and they have time to practice, then they begin to build positive relationships. This act builds their communication and language development. For collaborative learning to flourish in the classroom it is important that teacher talk is limited so that student participation is increased (Harrar, 2007). Liang, Mohan and Early, in a study conducted by Pica and Doughty (1985a; 1985b) found that student led instruction was more productive in language attainment than in teacher led instruction (Liang, Mohan & Early, 1998). Research by Kagan (2016) indicate a number of cooperative structures that can increase student collaboration in the classroom. These include Mix-Pair-Share, Rally Robin, Round Robin, Rally Coach, Quiz-Quiz-Trade, All Record Round Robin, Stand Up-Hand Up-Pair Up, Traveling Pair Share, Fan-N-Pick (Kagan, 2016).

According to Clowes, (2011) the list of structures is long and there are many "tools" on offer for the classroom teacher. The trick for the teacher is in selecting the right tool for the right job." (Clowes, 2011). Clowes goes on to identify the essential five "tools" which are: Rally Robin, Timed Pair Share, Round Robin, Rally Coach and Stand Up-Hand Up-Pair Up (Clowes, 2011). These structures and more can then be used by the teacher as he/she likes. These five Kagan Structures (Kagan, 2016) are described as follows:

- *Rally Robin*: Is when two students take turns stating answers
- *Timed Pair Share*: Is when two students share knowledge about a topic for a given time limit
- *Round Robin*: Is when students, in groups of 4, take turns stating answers
- *Rally Coach*: Is when two students work together-one student solves a problem while the other coaches
- *Stand Up-Hand Up-Pair Up*: when all the students stand up, put their hand up and then pair up to find a partner and answer questions

An Anecdotal View: How cooperative learning structures work in my classroom

There are plenty of Cooperative teaching structures that teachers use. To enable the children to engage with these strategies is a challenge but as I continue to implement them the children become more on task.

Let me explain how I use some of the structures in my EAL classroom:

- *Mix-Pair-Share*: It is not an easy task to explain to the children that they have to mix around the class, put their hand up and find a partner, as English is difficult for them to understand. I have to model the strategy with assistance from my teaching assistant. The first time I use any structure I have to physically pair up the children to explain that pairing is two students together and over time the children understand how to become a pair. Fully implementing this structure takes some time but eventually the children are able to find partners independently, albeit most of the partnerships are friendships. However, as long as they speak to each other in the beginning to become familiar with the structure I let friends pair up and as they become more confident with the structure, I insist they find other partners apart from their friends. After implementing mix-pair-share when the children are comfortable with moving around, I introduce Rally Coach.
- *Rally Coach*: For this structure, the high ability children like to take charge. Again, as long as they will speak in English with the low ability students and answer their questions, I let them take charge. Initially, I give the children one whiteboard and one pen to share between two. The instructions I can give for example are- I will say a phoneme and you will write it down while saying the writing phrase (the phonics program used is Read Write Inc. and to write letters we use a specific writing phrase so that children remember how to write the sounds/letters. This program also helps in English language acquisition as there are plenty of vocabulary acquired from it). As I say the phoneme, the confident children say the phrase and write it down on the whiteboard, then their partners have to check if the phoneme is correct and this directs them to say the phrase and they pick it up.
- *Quiz-Quiz Trade*: The children are given phonic cards. Then the children put their hand up and find a partner. After they find their partner, one partner asks the other partner what phonic letter it is and to name two things beginning with the sound. If the partner is unable to answer, then the first partner coaches the second partner and asks again. Then they switch and the second partner asks. In this way, all the children are interacting in English. Even if some students do not talk, they are listening to the words and some recognition is taking place.

After implementing these structures, I have noticed the confidence and the rise in the level of spoken English in my class. If the children are not speaking their own mind at least they are

repeating what they are hearing. The collaboration of the students ensures that students are in charge of their own learning and are also coming up with their own answers in a language that is not native to them.

5. Using Visuals

There are three main types of learners according to Gilakjani (2012); visual, kinaesthetic and auditory. Visual learners are those who use visual clues to understand a concept, kinaesthetic learners are those who learn through hands on experience and those who need interaction with physical objects and auditory learners are those who learn by listening, (Gilakjani, 2012). EAL students can also be visual, kinaesthetic or auditory learners but as they do not understand their non-native language even if they are auditory or kinaesthetic learners, visual clues benefit them. Krčelić and Matijević (2015) indicate that visual tools are powerful retention aids which increase understanding.” Visual learners in EAL require visual aids as visuals facilitate students’ understanding by providing concrete evidence of what is being said. Krcelic and Matijevic state that if visual tools are used properly, they facilitate learning foreign languages. Studies on learning have shown that individuals can record images and words in their memories and recall them in image and/or word forms (Krčelić & Matijević, 2015). Some examples of visual tools are pictures, posters, photos, illustrations, icons, symbols, sketches, figures, presentations, graphic organizers and where possible real objects. Using visuals is the ideal way to teach EAL students as they can “see” what you are asking them to do, what you are talking about and what your expectations are.

An Anecdotal View: How using visuals work in my classroom

I use visual tools on a regular basis in class. A common example of this practice is illustrated when I sing a song; for example, *Head shoulders knees and toes*. The children may not know what a head or shoulders or knees or toes are (in English) unless I point to the parts of the body which are being named. As the students begin to understand that it is their body parts they need to point to, they pick up the vocabulary easily. To teach subjects which require real objects is not so challenging as I can easily show them the real object. For example, in a phonics lesson I can show students an apple, a ball or a mouse. In a Math class, to represent a number, I can quantify it or show them a red heart or a blue ball. However, some concepts like “heavy and light” or “sink and float” are more abstract. Showing them pictures is not enough to define heavy or light. In situations like this I physically let the children hold objects and explain the concept of heavy or light. In the same vein, I demonstrate what objects sink and which object floats.

6. Stories and Songs

A. Stories

Reading stories in class seems to be a natural way to teach EAL students English. One of the reasons is that children relate to stories, even if they do not understand they look at the pictures and are able to connect. Gosn (2002) suggests authentic literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning, since children are naturally drawn to stories. Students’ language also expands as stories are told and they are asked to repeat or retell the story. Stories that are told should have good illustrations and vivid pictures to draw the children’s attention. This keeps them interested engages them in the learning of words. Brown (2004) recommends the following guidelines when choosing suitable books to read with EAL Students:

- Short and less complex, simple with repetitive language stories
- Less wordy and unthreatening so it is easily comprehensible
- Easy vocabulary with students knowing at least 75%-80% of the vocabulary
- Interesting illustrations so students understand the story and the vocabulary
- A story that the teacher will enjoy so that the children will see genuine interest from the teacher and in return the students will be excited about it as well.

Reading the same story repeatedly also has the advantage of expanding comprehension skills. If EAL students are going to learn new words, there is no point gaining the vocabulary if they do not know what those words mean or how to use them in the correct context. Thus, Gosn points out that it is important to ask questions intermittently to check for understanding (Gosn, 2002). Comprehension skills build up over time as the children become more comfortable with English language. Brown (2004) believes many children do not tire of practicing a repetitive and rhythmic text several times a day, many days a week. Consequently, stories which have some repetitive phrases do not bore children. Brown (2004) notes that his class continually craved to have Dr. Seuss' *The Foot Book*, which contains only 131 words (47 of these words are the word feet or foot) read to them. He also notes another book, *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, which is a short story based on a popular children's summer camp song, was very popular with his second-grade class. Instead of being bored with the story, their enthusiasm seemed to grow the more time they spent on it.

B. Songs

Songs are a good way to learn English and to teach other subjects. Songs have many repetitive patterns and children easily tune into the words. Songs also have a natural rhythm with a recurring beat that is similar to the stress patterns of spoken English. These patterns make some songs useful for practicing rhythm and stress. (Millington, 2011) Songs also help clear pronunciation of many English words. They support young learners to improve their listening skills, pronunciation and eventually improve their speaking skills (Millington, 2011). Songs are also a good way of providing visual clues and kinaesthetics so children can easily relate to the new vocabulary that they are learning. Some examples of songs that children can easily relate to are: *Head shoulder knees and toes*, *Tommy Thumbkin*, *If you are happy and you know it*, *Old Macdonald had a farm*, *The wheels on the bus* and *Good morning*.

An Anecdotal View: How stories/songs work in my classroom

When I first started to teach EAL students, I realized no matter which background/language/culture children came from reading a story from vividly coloured books will engage them. Children love stories even if they do not understand the language they are drawn into the story as their imagination soars. Reading books repeatedly helps develop language as children realize that they want to retell the story. A lot of vocabulary building has been done because children love to tell stories when I ask to retell them. At first, it might be just naming the characters, then they build on the story and can retell the story as they gain confidence. When I choose a story, I try and make sure that it is beautifully illustrated, and it will hold the children's attention. I try and make sure there are repetitive phrases or words that repeat. Having a puppet to tell the story is an added benefit as the children are mesmerized and are attracted to the story very quickly. As I settle the children on the mat, I show them the front cover and ask them what they see. At first, they do not have the vocabulary and reply in their native language, so I point to the picture and tell them in English (I show them the picture on

the Interactive whiteboard –IWB- so that it is enlarged, and all the children are able to see the front cover). Then I start the story. To tell the story I use my own voice but as the characters appear to speak them, I change and vary my voice making it deeper or thinner according to the character. While I read, I use facial expressions. I also ask them questions about what is going on and I make a note of it to ask them again. The next day, when I retell the story, I tell the children that they have to say the repeat phrase when I get to it. I go over the phrase with them and let them know what it is and as I read the story, I make sure to pause at the phrase so that they are able to say it. I usually ask 1-2 children who do know the word(s) and by the end of the book at least half of the students are saying it. In this way, they expand their vocabulary and knowledge in English.

Songs are an easy way to help develop language skills. I always sing *Days of the week* song, *Good Morning* song, *Good morning how are you?* song, *Months of the year*. When teaching EAL students shapes, numbers, and colours I use songs to give the children a better understanding of what a shape is, what numbers are and what objects have certain colours. For the shape song I sing the *square song*, *triangle song* and the *rectangle song* to name a few. Numbers are ordered so as we count, the children begin to understand that these are numbers, and they count their fingers. For colours I sing the songs available for all colours and eventually sing *I can sing a rainbow* song.

Conclusion

Teaching English as a second language is challenging but if proper channels like modelling, repetition, role play, cooperative learning structures, visuals, stories and songs are used, English can be learnt. Children who come to school with no English, and like the lost tourist, needs guidance from the teacher. Eventually our students do learn and understand the English language which at first seemed daunting and frightening. At the end of the school year the children become confident and use English like it is second nature to them.



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