

How young children learn English as another language

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Introduction

Young children are natural language acquirers; they are self-motivated to pick up language without conscious learning, unlike adolescents and adults. They have the ability to imitate pronunciation and work out the rules for themselves. Any idea that learning to talk in English is difficult does not occur to them unless it's suggested by adults, who themselves probably learned English academically at a later age through grammar-based text books.

Read the notes below about young children learning English as another language. You can also download these notes as a booklet. Right-click on the link below to download the booklet to your computer. You may print this booklet.

The advantages of beginning early

- Young children are still using their individual, innate language-learning strategies to acquire their home language and soon find they can also use these strategies to pick up English.
- Young children have time to learn through play-like activities. They pick up language by taking part in an activity shared with an adult. They firstly make sense of the activity and then get meaning from the adult's shared language.
- Young children have more time to fit English into the daily programme. School programmes tend to be informal and children's minds are not yet cluttered with facts to be stored and tested. They may have little or no homework and are less stressed by having to achieve set standards.
- Children who have the opportunity to pick up a second language while they are still young appear to use the same innate language-learning strategies throughout life when learning other languages. Picking up third, fourth, or even more languages is easier than picking up a second.
- Young children who acquire language rather than consciously learn it, as older children and adults have to, are more likely to have better pronunciation and feel for the language and culture. When monolingual children reach puberty and become more self-conscious, their ability to pick up language diminishes and they feel they have to consciously study English through grammar-based programmes. The age at which this change occurs depends greatly on the individual child's developmental levels as well as the expectations of their society.

Stages in picking up English

Spoken language comes naturally before reading and writing.

Silent period

When babies learn their home language, there is a 'silent period', when they look and listen and communicate through facial expression or gestures before they begin to speak. When young children learn English, there may be a similar 'silent period' when communication and understanding may take place before they actually speak any English words.

During this time parents should not force children to take part in spoken dialogue by making them repeat words. Spoken dialogues should be one-sided, the adult's talk providing useful opportunities for the child to pick up language. Where the adult uses parentese (an adjusted form of speech) to facilitate learning, the child may use many of the same strategies they used in learning their home language.

Beginning to talk

After some time, depending on the frequency of English sessions, each child (girls often more quickly than boys) begins to say single words ('cat', 'house') or ready-made short phrases ('What's that?', 'It's my book', 'I can't', 'That's a car', 'Time to go home') in dialogues or as unexpected statements. The child has memorised them, imitating the pronunciation exactly without realising that some may consist of more than one word. This stage continues for some time as they child picks up more language using it as a short cut to dialogue before they are ready to create their own phrases.

Building up English language

Gradually children build up phrases consisting of a single memorised word to which they add words from their vocabulary ('a dog', 'a brown dog', 'a brown and black dog') or a single memorised language to which they add their own input ('That's my chair', 'Time to play'). Depending on the frequency of exposure to English and the quality of experience, children gradually begin to create whole sentences.

Understanding

Understanding is always greater than speaking and young children's ability to comprehend should not be underestimated, as they are used to understanding their home language from a variety of context clues. Though they may not understand everything they hear in their home language, children grasp the gist – that is they understand a few important words and decipher the rest using different clues to interpret the meaning. With encouragement they soon transfer their 'gist' understanding skills to interpret meaning in English.

Frustration

After the initial novelty of English sessions, some young children become frustrated by their inability to express their thoughts in English. Others want to speak quickly in English as they can in their home language. Frustration can often be overcome by providing children with 'performance' pieces like 'I can count to 12 in English' or very simple rhymes, which consist of ready-made phrases.

Mistakes

Children should not be told they have made a mistake because any correction immediately demotivates. Mistakes may be part of the process of working out grammar rules of English or they may be a fault in pronunciation. 'I goed' soon becomes 'went' if the child hears the adult repeat back 'yes, you went'; or if the adult hears 'zee bus' and repeats 'the bus'. As in learning their home language, if children have an opportunity to hear the adult repeat the same piece of language correctly, they will self-correct in their own time.

Gender differences

Boys' brains develop differently from girls' and this affects how boys pick up language and use it. Sometimes mixed classes make little provision for boys, who may be overshadowed by girls' natural ability to use language. If young boys are to reach their potential, they need some different language experiences with girls and their achievements should not be compared with those of girls.

Language-learning environments

Young children find it more difficult to pick up English if they are not provided with the right type of experiences, accompanied by adult support using 'parentese' techniques.

- Young children need to feel secure and know that there is some obvious reason for using English.
- Activities need to be linked to some interesting everyday activities about which they already know, eg sharing an English picture book, saying a rhyme in English, having an ‘English’ snack.
- Activities are accompanied by adult language giving a running commentary about what is going on and dialogues using adjusted parentese language.
- English sessions are fun and interesting, concentrating on concepts children have already understood in their home language. In this way children are not learning two things, a new concept as well as new language, but merely learning the English to talk about something they already know.
- Activities are backed up by specific objects, where possible, as this helps understanding and increases general interest.

Reading

Children who can already read in their home language generally want to find out how to read in English. They already know how to decode words in their home language to get meaning from text and, if not helped to decode in English, may transfer their home language-decoding techniques and end up reading English with the home language accent.

Before they can decode English, young children need to know the 26 alphabet letter names and sounds. As English has 26 letters but on average 44 sounds (in standard English), introducing the remaining sounds is better left until children have more experience in using language and reading,

Beginning reading in English goes easily if young children already know the language they are trying to read. Many children work out by themselves how to read in English if they have shared picture books with adults or learned rhymes, as they are likely to have memorised the language. Reading what they know by heart is an important step in learning to read as it gives children opportunities to work out how to decode simple words by themselves. Once children have built up a bank of words they can read, they feel confident and are then ready for a more structured approach.

Parental support

Children need to feel that they are making progress. They need continual encouragement as well as praise for good performance, as any success motivates. Parents are in an ideal position to motivate and so help their children learn, even if they have only basic English themselves and are learning alongside their young children.

By sharing, parents can not only bring their child’s language and activities into family life, but can also influence their young children’s attitudes to language learning and other cultures. It is now generally accepted that most lifelong attitudes are formed by the age of eight or nine.

Further reading:

If you are interested in finding out more about how children learn languages we suggest the following websites:

- Carol Read, author and teacher trainer writes a blog about children learning English www.carolread.wordpress.com

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