

# Teaching Young Learners in Korea: Adapting the Syllabus and Materials to Meet Their Needs

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## **1. Introduction**

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to young English language learners (YLS) as opposed to adults', presents different challenges to the EFL teacher. Clear identification of these challenges can then inform future syllabus design and delivery, subsequently improving learner outcomes. These learning outcomes can be further enhanced by identification of the chief means by which EFL teaching needs to be adapted to best accommodate for YLS needs.

This essay addresses the above by identifying important ways in which it is proposed that YLS differ from adult EFL learners. These challenges it is presented incorporate the need for identification of the YLS different learning styles, learner characteristics, theories of learning, motivational roots, and classroom management requirements. The essay then expands to discuss three main ways in which EFL teaching needs to be adapted to best meet the differing needs of YL learners.

I have been teaching EFL in Korea for the past 4 years and all my EFL experience has been gained in Korea. Therefore, this essay, where appropriate, discusses Korean YLS in a Korean context. In order for this essay to discuss how Korean YLS differ from Korean adult learners, and how EFL teaching needs to best adapted to accommodate for these differing needs, it is prudent to commence with a brief general definition of Korean EFL YLS.

## **2. YLS in Korea defined.**

Cameron (2001: xi) defines YLS as being learners aged between five and twelve years of age. This definition is adopted throughout this essay. While this definition is not universally applicable, it is applicable within the Korean context. YLS in Korea finish elementary school education at the age of twelve. Whilst Korean YLS do not

undertake compulsory English lessons until the chronological age of eight in Korea (Robertson, 2002: 1) many parents send their children to after school English programs called hagwons (Zhou, 2006: 15). YLs roughly commence studying the English language around the age of five at hagwons (Lee, 2012). Therefore, Cameron's definition marries well within the Korean context. The following section will now identify some of the main differences between YLs and adult learners.

### **3. How YLs and adults differ in the EFL context**

In order to discuss how YLs and adults differ in the EFL context this section will discuss learning styles, general learner characteristics, theories of learning, motivational roots, and classroom management requirements.

#### **3.1 Learning Styles**

Reid (1995, cited in Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 59) defines learning style as being "used to describe an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred way of absorbing, processing and retaining new information and skills". While adult learners demonstrate a preference for a wide range of learning styles, visual, aural, and kinesthetic (VAK) learning styles are the main sensory learning styles attributed to children (Dunn, 1984: 10-19). Reid (1995: 132) suggests that the learning style preference evolves from kinesthetic to visual to auditory following the YLs development. Regarding my current teaching context, Korean learners are strong visual learners in particular (Reid, 1987: 96). Visually oriented learners like to learn by doing exercises such as listing and word grouping. Aural oriented learners show a preference for work involving tapes and practicing aloud. Kinesthetic learners show a preference for exercises needing physical movement such as miming and role plays (Richards and Renandya, 2002: 127).

### **3.1.1 General learner characteristics**

One of the major challenges that a YL teacher has to adjust to is the numerous different roles they have to fulfill when teaching YLs. When teaching YLs "the teacher's role is that of parent, teacher, friend, motivator, co-ordinator, and organiser" (Vale and Feunteun, 1995: 27). Consequently, the YL teacher needs to be aware of the unique challenges that the teaching of YLs presents. One of the chief means by which an EFL teacher can accomplish this is to enhance their awareness of the different "instincts, skills and characteristics" (Halliwell, 1992: 3) that YLs come equipped with to the EFL classroom. This would then in turn allow the teacher to prepare the teaching syllabus and materials accordingly to meet these needs.

Holderness (1991: 18) informs us that one of the important different YL characteristics is that they are "doers" and therefore they need to be actively engaged with a variety of fun educational activities throughout the lesson to utilize this enthusiasm. Additionally, YLs "are more enthusiastic and lively as learners" (Cameron, 2001: I). This characteristic can be nurtured to benefit the teaching context. This is because this enthusiasm and liveliness can be positively channeled through the provision of kinesthetic exercises that appeal to the learning styles of some YLs. YLs differing characteristics compared to adults can further be utilized because they want to "please their teacher rather than their peer group" (Cameron, 2001: I). Owing to this characteristic, the teacher can seek to maximize this for pedagogical/disciplinary purposes.

Two further important characteristic differences between YLs and adults are that, firstly YLs "will have a go at an activity even when they don't quite understand why and how" (Cameron, 2001: I). Secondly, YLs are "more willing to take chances than adults even when proficiency is quite low" (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 31). Subsequently, the

above two characteristics can be nurtured to provide challenging but achievable material to develop YLs language learning.

YLs are at a different cognitive stage to adults. Bourke (2006: 80) discusses how YLs are "in the concrete operations stage of cognitive development". Therefore, material should be provided that reflects this awareness and seeks to utilize it for its educational properties. YLs generally live in "a world of fantasy and make belief" (Bourke, 2006: 280), therefore material should be provided that taps into this fantasy world. This would then allow the YLs to "test out their version of the world through fantasy and confirm how the world actually is by imagining how it might be different" (Halliwell, 1992: 7). Cameron (1994: 34) discusses how adults and YLs realities differ when discussing how "it takes a child until about the age of ten years of age before the adult categorization of living things as including plants and animals is acquired". Therefore, concrete objects such as puppets can further be employed to tap into the YLs fantasy world for pedagogical purposes. Puppets have shown to help YLs communicate more spontaneously (Majaron, 2002: 61). This is helpful because one important YL characteristic is that above all YLs generally "take great delight in talking" (Halliwell, 1992: 3).

Another important difference between YLs and adult learners is the theoretical background that guides current EFL practice. Regarding the theories of learning that are predominantly focused upon YLs learning, the following theories are significant.

### **3.1.2 Critical period hypothesis**

Cameron (2001: 7) discusses how children pick up foreign language quickly and develop good accents. This is supported by Bourke (2006: 297) who claims "it is now generally agreed that an early start is desirable and beneficial". One theory that seeks to provide causation for this anomaly is the critical period hypothesis. This theory

holds that pre-pubescent learners can learn a second language more effectively than adults, because their brains can still rely upon the same mechanisms that are being developed by the child to acquire their first language. The critical period hypothesis holds "that older learners will learn language differently after this stage and particularly for accents, can never achieve the same level of proficiency" (Cameron, 2001: 13).

However, while some support the critical period hypothesis (Patkowski, 1980), Lightbown and Spada (2006: 4) remind us that "for every researcher who holds that there are maturational constraints on language acquisition there is another who considers that the age factor cannot be separated from factors such as motivation, social identity, and the conditions of learning".

### **3.1.3 Zone of proximal development**

Rogoff and Wertsch (1984: 5) suggest "for a child to profit from a joint cognitive activity, such an activity must be geared appropriately to the child's level of potential development, thereby advancing the child's actual development". One of the influential theories regarding a child's developmental potential is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD focuses upon what a child is capable of learning, as opposed to what they have already learned. The ZPD emphasizes ways that a child's development can be promoted owing to the input of graded adult instruction. This is facilitated by the ZPD linking the child's present levels of developmental functioning with the level at which they can function when given instruction. Following this theory, the child's developmental functioning is facilitated by the teacher mediating what it is the child should learn next (Cameron, 2001: 8). It is proposed that "if the new language is within a child's ZPD she or he will make sense of it and start the process of internalising it" (Cameron, 2001: 11)

However, while the above guide to ZPD highlights the role of adult instruction for a

child's development, Donato (1994) emphasizes the role of private speech by the child to aid their ZPD progression. Donato (1994: 48) discussed how private speech is used by the YL as a "means of self guidance in carrying out an activity, beyond one's current level of competence".

### **3.1.4 Scaffolding**

Scaffolding is viewed by many to be an important part of the YL teacher's language, and links heavily with Vygotsky's ZPD (see 3.1.3). Vygotsky's research into ZPD influenced Bruner who subsequently developed the theory of scaffolding. When a YL teacher seeks to introduce new ideas and vocabulary they can use routines and provide contextual support to aid these learning processes. This routine and "kind of contextual support is known as scaffolding" (Bourke, 2006: 282). Scaffolding is defined by Cameron (2001: 8) as being the language that "adults use...to mediate the world for children to help them solve problems".

YL teachers' scaffolding aid can be either vertical or sequential (Foley, 1994: 101-102). Vertical scaffolding is used to enhance the YL current language levels by the teacher using prompts and asking questions to develop the YL language. Sequential scaffolding develops during games and activities where the teacher uses the theme to develop the YLs vocabulary or introduce new ideas.

### **3.2 Motivation**

Motivation is defined by Brown (2000: 72) as being the "extent to which you make choices about (a) goals to pursue and (b) the effort you will devote to that pursuit". Its importance in an EFL context is highlighted by Dornyei (1994, 273) when citing how "motivation is one of the main determinants of ...L2 learning achievement". Subsequently, for an EFL teacher to seek to promote learner outcomes they need to

identify what is the YLs motivation for learning a L2. This may include intrinsic, extrinsic, integrative, and instrumental motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is in "evidence whenever students' natural curiosity and interest energises their learning" (Deci and Ryan, 1985: 245). A learner with intrinsic motivation is predominantly driven by the internal challenge of learning a L2. The difference between adult learners and YLs' intrinsic motivation is that generally their intrinsic motivational roots differ. This is because an adult has more opportunities to learn a L2 of their volition and have often paid money for this. YLs intrinsic motivational roots often stem from learning an L2 owing to the influence of an external force e.g. parents (Sung, 1998: 205-216). Additionally, they are unlikely to be personally financially paying for the experience of learning a L2. Regarding YLs intrinsic motivation, the learning situation has to provide the motivation (Kennedy and Jarvis, 1991: 5). Subsequently, exercises often need to be fun and engaging to promote YLs intrinsic motivation levels. Owing to the above, YLs intrinsic motivation to overcome and persevere with the challenges of learning a L2 generally may be lower than that of an adult learner.

Extrinsically motivated behaviors are ones "that the individual performs to receive some extrinsic rewards (e.g. good grades) or to avoid punishment" (Dornyei, 1994: 275). Regarding extrinsic motivation, adults have more opportunity to be learning an L2 for career purposes and need good grades to further their careers etc. YLs in contrast are likely to aspire to gain good grades to satisfy the demands of their parents (Sung, 1998: 205-216), or for the prestige of gaining good grades when compared to their peers. Therefore, adults and YLs roots of extrinsic motivation are likely to differ.

Integrative motivation is "associated with a positive disposition towards the L2 group" (Dornyei, 2003: 5). An adult learner has more opportunities to develop integrative

motivation than an YL. Adults will be more likely to interact with a L1 speaking community through their sources of employment or when traveling to other countries on vacation. YLs in contrast, need to deal with concrete objects that they can connect with visibly (Cameron, 2001: 18). Therefore, the abstract idea of YLs learning a L1 to integrate with the L2 community is likely to be alien to them. Subsequently, adult and YLs integrative motivation levels are likely to differ significantly.

An adult's instrumental motivation is related to "the potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency such as getting a better paid job" (Dornyei, 1994: 274). YLs instrumental motivation, in contrast, is likely to derive from rewards such as candy being afforded for good performance in an area of L2 study. Therefore, adult learners and YLs sources for instrumental motivation are likely to vary considerably.

### **3.3 Classroom management requirements**

One of the important differences between adult learners and YLs derives from YLs lower attention spans, which in turn have important implications for the demands placed upon the EFL teacher's classroom management requirements. These requirements need to be addressed to combat the disciplinary problems that derive as a result of YLs lower attention spans. This issue is discussed by Dornyei (2001a) when highlighting discipline is of real concern to those teachers moving from an adult teaching environment to one in which their learners are YLs.

Cameron (2001: 15) points out "children are generally less able to give selective and prolonged attention to features of learning tasks than adults, and are more easily diverted and distracted by other pupils". Cameron (2003: 111) proposes remedy for this problem when arguing that "if children are to be kept attentive and mentally active, the teacher must be alert and adaptive to their responses to tasks, adjusting activities and exploring learning opportunities that arise on the spot". One of the ways to do

this is to implement what Halliwell (1992: 20) terms settle and stir activities. When YLs are showing ill attention to the class stirring activities can be used to combat this. Stir activities stimulate and motivate the YLs towards engagement. Types of stirring activities include competitions, oral work and group work (Halliwell, 1992: 20). In contrast, when YLs are becoming over excited, settling activities help to combat the problems presented by this over excitement. Settling activities help to settle the YLs and calm them down. Types of settling activities include copying, coloring, and listening activities (Halliwell, 1992: 20). The following sections now identify means by which EFL teaching can be adapted to YLs needs.

#### **4. Important adaptations**

There are a variety of means by which the YL EFL teacher can adapt the classroom environment, materials, and syllabus to meet the needs of YLs. The following sections will identify these adaptations by focusing on adapting the classroom behavior, adapting the course book, and finally adapting the syllabus.

##### **4.1 Classroom Behavior: Praise, Rewards, Punishments and Limited L1 use**

These adaptations are essential because as discussed previously (3.3) discipline is one of the main concerns YL teachers have when teaching YLs. Additionally, in order to promote motivation levels arguably the appropriate use of praise, rewards, punishments, and L1 use is significant in this endeavor.

###### **4.1.1 Praise**

Henderlong and Lepper (2002: 774) warn us "that praise like penicillin, must not be administered haphazardly". Consequently praise should be afforded only to YLs when they make genuine progress or complete a task towards the higher margins of their ZPD. Furthermore, when an EFL teacher does issue YLs praise it should not be done

in a manner which evaluates the YL. This is because YLs become “very uncomfortable with praise that evaluates them” (Faber and Mazlish, 1995: 35). Therefore, praise should concentrate upon evaluating the YLs work and not the YL.

#### **4.1.2 Rewards**

Regarding rewards it “is well documented that if you start offering rewards for something that the students were already doing for their own reasons, the reward may undermine the existing motivation” (Deci and Ryan, 1985, cited in Dornyei, 2001b: 129). Subsequently, it is prevalently argued against the use of candy as a reward mechanism within the language classroom. Therefore, identification needs to be sought of the successful alternatives to this measure. One way of adapting classroom behavior for facilitating for the above awareness is to negotiate with the YLs the behavior that will attract an award. Furthermore, rewards should have a lasting visual representation (Dornyei, 2001b: 130). This could include badges, certificates and star charts being displayed around the classroom.

However, Kohn (1993: 1-5) argues against the use of any material that symbolizes a YLs level of performance compared to others e.g. star charts. Kohn argues for the creation of a classroom environment that emphasizes cooperation as opposed to competition.

#### **4.1.3 Punishments**

As mentioned previously (3.3) discipline is viewed as one of the chief concerns for the YL teacher. Therefore, it is imperative that YLs classroom management boundaries are established. One of the means by which punishment can be implemented is to employ the recommendations suggested by Moon (2000: 41-59) which include negotiating with the YLs to establish a set of classroom rules and stipulating the punishment for breach of these rules. This allows for the YLs to develop a sense of

ownership over their classroom and learning while ensuring recognition of the classroom behavior that potentially warranted punishment. The negotiated rules should then be placed in a visible place within the classroom, where all students can see them.

Moon (ibid) also advocates for the creation of a positive classroom atmosphere to seek to combat negative YL behavior. One of the means by which she proposes this positive atmosphere can be created is for the teacher and YLs to seek to solve the behavioral problems together, as opposed to one party implementing a punishment upon the other party. Therefore, by sitting down and trying to solve the behavioral problem with the YL, the reason for the poor behavior can often be identified. However, within my current teaching context it is dubious if this technique would be feasible to introduce owing to my limited L2 (Korean) and my students limited L2 (English).

#### **4.1.4 Permitting limited use of the L1**

For some the use of the L1 in the language classroom has been a bone of contention (Krashen, 1981). However, within my present teaching context some of the Korean English teachers lack the L2 proficiency to conduct a lesson in full, using only the L2. Furthermore, regardless of how well teacher language and material are graded, it is difficult to provide comprehensible input to all students within a mixed level class. If the YLs don't comprehend the input, they may be predisposed to become off task with potential behavioral problems being exhibited. For the above reasons the classroom behavior being adapted to allow for limited L1 use is advocated. Harbard (1992: 350-355) highlights how the use of L1 within the language classroom can be of valuable use to stimulate discussion, to clarify and to increase awareness of the interaction between L1 and L2 to aid the language acquisition processes.

Use of the L1 to stimulate discussion is important because as previously discussed (3.1.1) YLs take great delight in talking and are often aural learners (3.1). Therefore, the limited use of the L1 should be permitted to accommodate for these characteristics. Additionally, the stimulation of conversation could appeal to the kinesthetic learners when coupled with material that involves miming and role plays.

Using the L1 to clarify features of the L2 with YLs is important. This is owing to the low attention spans of YLs who need to be kept actively engaged throughout. Therefore, by not providing comprehensible input to YLs, it may culminate in rapid loss of attention to task, with subsequent opportunities for behavioral problems being exhibited.

The use of the L1 to increase awareness of how the L1 and L2 relate is beneficial for classroom behavior. This is once again due to its ability to provide comprehensible input which promotes YLs engagement with subsequent opportunities for negative behavior being diluted.

#### **4.2 Adapting the course book**

The "textbook is an almost universal element of ELT teaching" (Hutchinson, 1994: 315) and therefore by identifying beneficial means by which it can be adapted is important within the majority of EFL teaching contexts, and is therefore why this essay argues for its adaptation.

When adapting the textbook I advise observing McGrath's (2002: 107) definition of what constitutes a good text which is a text which "tells us something we don't know; they contain interesting context and they provoke a reaction". This definition is valuable because it promotes YL attention and motivation for learning. As discussed previously these characteristics feature dominantly with YLs and therefore need to be

accommodated for.

When a teacher does choose to adapt the course book, Halliwell (1992: 113) proposes they ask themselves "what does the course book do well...and what does the teacher do better?" Once the teacher has identified the answer to these two pertinent questions they can then identify the materials that can serve to supplement the course book, within their specific teaching contexts.

#### **4.2.1 The use of story/picture books**

As discussed in previous sections seeking to tap into the fantasy worlds of YLs, promoting mental engagement, promoting motivation, and providing material that accommodates for YLs learning styles are important when teaching YLs. To accommodate for all of the previous, this essay now advocates for the use of story/picture books when teaching YLs.

Tapping into the fantasy world of YLs can be used to promote concentration, motivation, and learning by the YLs. Good stories tap into the YLs fantasy worlds because "they engage children's imagination by their rich, authentic meaningful use of the foreign language" (Garvie, 1990: 159). In support, Sheu (2008: 48) presents "a good story will always attract students". Story/picture books "are the most valuable resource...they offer children a world of supported meaning that they can relate to" (Slattery and Willis, 2001: 96). This supported meaning promotes more comprehensible meaning for the YLs with subsequent benefits for YLs motivation and mental engagement potentially being displayed. Regarding engaging the YLs and promoting motivation further, Ellis and Brewster (2002: 1-2) discuss how stories could be "motivating, challenging and full of fun". This appeals to the YLs characteristics identified in previous sections, importantly including the learning situation needing to provide for the YLs motivational needs.

Regarding YLs language development story/picture books are useful because they can be used to saliently prepare them for a future focus on grammar. Stories “teach children the verb tenses of the past and the future when they are intensely preoccupied with the present” (Meek, 1995: 6). Other relevant benefits of story books usage includes that “later on you can use stories to help children practice listening, speaking, reading and writing” and therefore stories can be used to cover all main receptive/productive language learning skills. The previous develop YLs language learning which promotes their intrinsic motivation levels (Dlugosz, 2000: 289).

As well as the above advantages of story/picture books, they can be adapted to fit the learning styles of YLs (VAK). They can involve the use of tapes to appeal to the aural learners. They naturally lend themselves to appeal to the visual learners and can readily be adapted to require bodily movement to accommodate for the kinesthetic learners. This could involve bodily movement imitating verbs in the story/picture books such as jump, hush, and sleep. Furthermore, story/picture books are useful to seek to promote YLs intrinsic motivation levels because “the books children can read are visible signs of their accomplishment, and have the effect of motivating both the student and their parent” (Dlugosz, 2000: 289).

However, many EFL pedagogical story/picture books in Korea continue to use pictures representing western culture (Lee, 2009: 1-14). Kuhlweck (1999) warns against this because YLs are still making sense of their own culture, and this will cause them confusion. Therefore, story/picture books need adapting to feature Korean culture material within my present teaching context.

### **4.3. Syllabus adaptations**

Adapting the syllabus to accommodate for the use of music and songs when teaching YLs brings the following substantial benefits to the teaching of YLs and is therefore why

music/songs accommodation are argued for within the syllabus. Cameron (2001: 81) tells us YLs need to meet new words repetitively. As YL's learn words by collocations (Cameron, 2001: 81) a good fun vehicle to facilitate for this is the use of songs such as "Old McDonald had a farm", which repeats phrases on numerous occasions. Furthermore, Vale and Feunteun (1995) discuss how the use of songs/rhymes provides for a valuable focus on pronunciation, stress, and intonation. An important advantage of the use of music/songs with YLs learning an L2 is that it has also been shown to lower affective filters (Stansell, 2005). Additionally, songs can involve the use of pictures to accommodate for visual learners, bodily movement to accommodate for kinesthetic learners, and listening exercises to accommodate for aural learners. Songs therefore can readily be adapted to accommodate for the three chief YL learner styles (VAK).

Because teaching materials are ostensibly often employed to introduce new vocabulary, accommodating for YLs learning styles are vital for this. The benefits of songs for this endeavor is illustrated by Smeets's (2010: 93) study when YLs were able to remember 5% more words when using their preferred learning style. This is supported by Medina (1990) who discusses how music can make words more memorable. Therefore the usage of songs/music within the syllabus will accommodate for kinesthetic and aural learners vocabulary development in particular.

## **5. Conclusion**

The role of teaching YLs can be a challenging experience, but with enthusiasm and diligence these challenges can be nurtured to make the experience a rewarding one. This essay has discussed means by which YLs characteristics can best be accommodated for by adapting pedagogical practices/materials. An emphasis on promoting YLs attention and motivation levels can ease the adaptations

implementation process. The implementing of these adaptations can further be eased by observing YLs learning styles which can then be contrived to identify appropriate adaptations. These adaptations may emphasize (but not restricted to) adaptations to the classroom, course book and the syllabus.

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