

Investigating The Ways Young Learners Differ From Adults In The Context Of EFL/ESL.

BY

Mehboobkhan Ismail.

Introduction

The process of language acquisition may be more or less complicated regarding the students' motivations, learning styles, the role of teachers, and the age of learners. As such, young English as a Second Language (EFL) learners need another way of instruction and teaching than adult EFL learners, even regarding their level of language proficiency: Starting from the elementary one and getting to the upper-intermediate level is a long way that requires systemic approach. Different learning styles and approaches can be applied by younger EFL learners with regard to the goals set and attained. At the same time, it is important for young EFL learners to visualize some words from the vocabulary and repeat exercises or movements to understand what certain words mean.

Real life situations together with rhyming and songs can be used effectively with EFL learners of younger age groups rather than with adult language learners. So, various researches have been explored to see how the learning styles and EFL teaching techniques differ with young and adult EFL learners. Certain solutions have been found to use in teaching strategies with young EFL learners. The role of teacher and their accents as well as the gender of learners may affect the progress and the final level of the language proficiency when the course ends. The things for which adult learners value language courses have also been examined to see how this information may pertain to young EFL learners and activities that can be introduced into the English as a Second Language class.

Review of the Literature

Teachers should apply various techniques to make young EFL learners interested and focused. As suggested in the study by Stelma and Onat-Stelma (2010), teachers that specialize in the area of adult learners need some time and experience to make their way toward children in a younger learners group. So, it is necessary to take into account the level of a teacher's expertise and his or her attitude to young EFL learners. The process of classroom management may be treated as the one going beyond "a metaphor of the teacher as a manager and/or facilitator, to focus more broadly on how teachers interact with and involve learners in ways that may result in the kinds of educational outcomes that they aim to promote" (Stelma and Onat-Stelma 2010, p. 195). So, the role of teachers shapes the teaching-learning process.

The learning styles are claimed to be one of the most studied concept related to language acquisition and learners' behavior, motivations, and other theories and approaches. As such, the learning styles of EFL learners regardless of their age can depend on a number of factors including context, environment, encouragement, and others. Mercer (2011) reported that learners' beliefs shape the way learners feel about the process of language acquisition and their progress in it. In addition, the learners' beliefs are affected greatly by the learners' environments, contexts, and experiences. It is inappropriate to try to describe a learner's beliefs as either positive or negative, because the "learners' belief systems [is] appropriate for a particular individual embedded within a specific sociocultural and educational context, and even more importantly set against the backdrop of the individual's unique personal history and experiences" (p. 70-71). So, progress in language acquisition depends on many factors that are applied to different learners.

The role teachers play in the language learners' progress is immense. It is important how a learner perceived the teacher and treats his or her instructions. This means that mistakes made by teachers may contribute negatively to learners' motivations, learning styles, and the overall perception of the teacher in the process of language acquisition. As reported in the study by Butler (2007), teachers that were native English speakers and nonnative English speakers took part in the research to show how EFL learners can change their perception of the oral speech when some portions of text are read by native or nonnative speakers of the language. The teachers in Hong Kong believe that "NESs [native English speakers] are superior to NNESs [nonnative English speakers], particularly in oral communicative abilities, and the teachers' authority and confidence may be threatened by such beliefs" (Butler 2007, p. 3). So, the qualification of language teachers matters a lot for the way learners perceive the spoken speech and progress in language acquisition.

Different techniques have been used by language learners to improve the progress and achieve better results, Learners motivations and styles can be researched as important components of a learner's progress, whereas basic achievements in language acquisition may be as significant as the further progress. In this respect, Gorsuch and Taguchi (2010) suggested that reading proficiency may be one of the factors that influence the way EFL learners understand the information and memorize words and speech patterns. This means that EFL learners that have a better reading proficiency have higher chances in attaining success in this area contrasted to those with poor reading proficiency.

Conferences are used to improve understanding of the language teachers and learners' problems and issues. It is also a good way for sharing findings and concerns about the learners' progress and factors that may compromise their

progress, including accent of the language teacher or learning style and motivations. As reported by Fortune and Andon (2012), the article by Natsuko Shintani, focuses on young EFL learners, “aged six, recruited by a private language school in Japan” (p. 168). The author of the analyzed article researched the output and input of learners and the social speech as the one pertaining to the better level of language acquisition and a great progress. Besides, vocabulary output tasks can facilitate and improve the EFL learners’ acquisition techniques and contribute positively to their overall perception of tasks in terms of the progress.

The use of modern technologies can be beneficial for EFL learners at any age and with any language proficiency level. Communicating with each others in social networks users from different parts of the world can improve their language proficiency independently from language teachers and EFL courses. At the same time, EFL learners can improve their progress by means of getting involved into various courses aimed at facilitating interactions with other language learners. Peterson (2012) stated that the use of the 3D multi-user virtual environment referred to as Second Life can be rather effective for EFL learners, because they could discuss and negotiate the meanings of phrases when certain problems occurred. The process of informal communication is the best way of progressing in foreign language acquisition. In this respect, the use of modern technologies and innovations can facilitate the independent acquisition of the foreign language.

Some concerns may be raised by the emerging popularity of gender issues in the language studies: Gender differences and roles are claimed to affect EFL learners and change their perception of the foreign language and certain phenomena in it. At the same time, the analytical and intuitive approaches used by adult EFL learners may affect the young EFL learners to the same extent suggesting a new

area to be examined. Aliakbari and Mahjub (2010) have explored the preferences of female and male EFL learners: female EFL learners use intuitive approach with “random methods of exploration, remembering spatial images most easily, and working best with the ideas which require overall assessment” (p. 42), whereas male EFL learners use analytical approach by means of using the following strategies: “recall verbal material most readily and are especially comfortable with the ideas requiring step by step analysis” (p. 42). So, the young EFL learners may be involved into certain assessment to explore to which extent they have gender differences in terms of language acquisition and learning strategies to use the findings for their progress.

The type of instruction should be focused on the learners with regard to their age, gender (as suggested in the study by Aliakbari and Mahjub 2010), and language proficiency level. Panova and Lyster (2002) oppose the research conducted by Lyster and Ranta (1997) regarding the age of learners and the type of instruction. As such, the study by Panova and Lyster (2002) explores the environment of adult learners with the communication-based instruction, whereas the study by Lyster and Ranta (1997) was based on the findings from a group of young learners introduced to the content-based instruction. So, young learners may benefit from content-focused instruction due to insignificant language proficiency and vocabulary that would prevent them from effective communication in case the instruction is based on communication.

Discussion

Differences between learners lie in the learning styles and the influence of the learning environment to them. For instance, the learning styles of younger learners relate closely to what parents and teachers tell younger children and teenagers to

learn. Type of information acquired by young learners depends also on the academic curriculum and various innovations and reforms in this field. A teacher presents the information, younger learners absorb and process it – this is a simple algorithm according to which the way of information acquisition takes place. The same happens with the foreign language acquisition process when young EFL learners are put into the learning environment that has a lot of opportunities to offer to them. The teacher should be responsible for the involvement of learners into various activities and keeping them focused all the time the class takes places.

Motivation and excitement are integral parts for students. Accents of language teachers as well as learning styles of EFL learners may compromise the progress made by young EFL learners in the process of language acquisition. At the same time, learners should be interested in the process, because this is what keeps them motivated. If learners do not feel the information to be interesting, they are not likely to memorize it and use it in their communication in future. On the contrast, the information that seems to be interesting to young EFL learners is likely to be quickly absorbed and applied in their future language acquisition activities. Teacher may be in charge of the entire class by means of changing types of activities and involving learners into various exciting games to learn new words and speech patterns.

It may be rather challenging to keep young EFL learners interested and motivated all the time during classes, because regarding the age and the level of energy children usually have, it may be complicated to make them focus on the information to be learnt. A teacher's attention is one of the issues young EFL learners compete for. At this point, it is necessary to introduce a system of appraisals and punishment based on some points, achievements, and tasks completed. Such a system may be helpful with young EFL learners that need some praise to feel that

they are on the right way and to keep them motivated as well. The role of teacher includes exploration of every learner in terms of strong and weak sides and application of ways to fill in the gap and contribute positively to further development of language proficiency.

Though gender differences may influence the way young EFL learners perceive the information and use it for their further language acquisition process, it is highly recommended for teachers to find ways to integrate new ideas with all learners regardless of their gender. The issue of gender difference applied to language acquisition should be a way to help them improve their learning styles and processing of the information rather than a method of separating boys from girls in terms of their preferences in learning. At the same time, young EFL learners should know the rules of acting in class and behave correspondingly: This also concerns young adult EFL learners that may act out. Nevertheless, the teacher is the one who sets rules and takes care so that everyone in the class follow those rules with the purpose of more effective learning environment.

As soon as language learners recognize the authority of the teacher in the class, they are likely to engage into learning activities more actively than at the stage of getting used to the teacher and other learners. Especially, this concerns younger EFL learners than adults that know the rules of social communication and know how to get the maximum of the situation. When the adult EFL learners seem to be self-motivated and focused, it takes some times and efforts to receive the same or at least a part of this behavior and motivation from young EFL learners. The process of learning is taken more seriously by adult learners, because they know why they do it and why they need it. Young EFL learners may be interested in activities, but they

rarely relate them to their future benefits in learning, career, travelling, and other activities.

Adult learners are not only self-motivated, but also set goals to attain them in future. Language acquisition can be another goal set by an adult person to be achieved. On the one hand, young learners are in a more beneficial position, because their parents and teachers recognize some language abilities in them or simply decide that such skills and knowledge may be important for them in future. At this point, it is necessary to analyze whether the young EFL learner want to learn the language and use it for certain purposes or is a mere marionette in the hands of adults that force him or her to get involved into activities that do not seem to be interesting for the child. Motivation is a great impulse that makes people get up and move further, to move toward their goals, to move toward their success.\

Sharing experiences is another thing that may be interesting for adult EFL learners, because it enables them to gain confidence and show others the results of the hard work. The same principle works for young learners of English as a Foreign Language. Adult and young learners may suggest interesting ideas to be integrated into the curriculum: Adults use real-life situations and request to explain them how to ask questions and get their way in certain situations, whereas young EFL learners may be first interested in the vocabulary and its application in various settings. So, the way children make inquiries is perfect for the content-based lessons shaped for young learners unlike communication-based instructions made for adult learners.

Adult language learners have some things they value about the learning process and opportunities that frequently open in front of them when they start the course. Some, some of the things learners find interesting, pleasant, and beneficial can be used in the course of teaching younger EFL learners, though the activities to

be mentioned can be of the same use for adult EFL learners. As such, interactions with other language learners may be interesting for both adult and young EFL learners: Assessing others, comparing and contrasting one's language proficiency and skills with those of other learners may be rather effective to track down the progress. When adult and young learners acquire certain knowledge, they perceive it as a positive experience and one of the values of language acquisition. Learning new words, phrases, and language patterns benefits the learners and their perception of the language acquisition activity.

Solutions

The young EFL learners should be provided with appropriate teaching strategies aimed at guiding them through the process of language acquisition. At this point, it is necessary to outline a few effective steps that can be applied in practice to meet the needs of young learners. In this respect, young language learners should be provided with sufficient space and time for their interrelations with each other in small groups: This approach would be effective at the stage when they have some ideas to share with the help of the foreign language. So, language proficiency affects the activities to be introduced to the young EFL learners, because they may fail to accomplish some tasks without knowing vocabulary or speech patterns. Learners should be free to choose the activities regarding their preferences, abilities, and learning styles.

Every young EFL learner has certain skills that would help him or her to acquire new information and apply it effectively in practice. Reading skills pertain to the beneficial ones, because they make the process of language acquisition easier and more information-oriented. As suggested in the study by Gorsuch and Taguchi (2010), reading proficiency of EFL learners can be improved in order to open up the

chances to attain greater success in language acquisition. As suggested in the study by Diehr and Rymarczyk (2010), different methods and approaches can be used with the reading assignments including “silent reading... right from the beginning of EFL courses” (p. 58). This is aimed at improving the reading skills and comprehension skills. Besides, silent reading is used to develop the inner speech of young EFL learners in the context of reading and comprehension assignments.

Language teachers should be proficient in the foreign language in order to give learners the right guidelines and serve as a model of speaking, pronunciation, and accent. According to the findings by Butler (2007), language teachers that are nonnative English speakers may compromise the progress of EFL learners. Especially, this concerns younger EFL learners that may have difficulties with their native language not regarding the foreign one. In addition, it is necessary to take into account the accent of the teacher and the extent to which it may compromise the overall comprehension of a learner. In other words, language teachers should be chosen with regard to their language proficiency and the experience of having worked with young EFL learners opposed to the experience of teaching adult language learners in the context of the EFL.

Team work can be used as one of the effective activities in the class environment. Collaboration is aimed at developing communication skills with regard to the active use of the foreign language by young EFL learners. The article by Natsuko Shintani discussed in the editorial by Fortune and Andon (2012) focuses on the output tasks and their importance for the learners’ progress. For instance, tasks that pertain to collaboration and team work may be more effective than simple memorization of the vocabulary. Instead, editing of some words and sentences may be applied to make young EFL learners collaborate on the task rather than take their

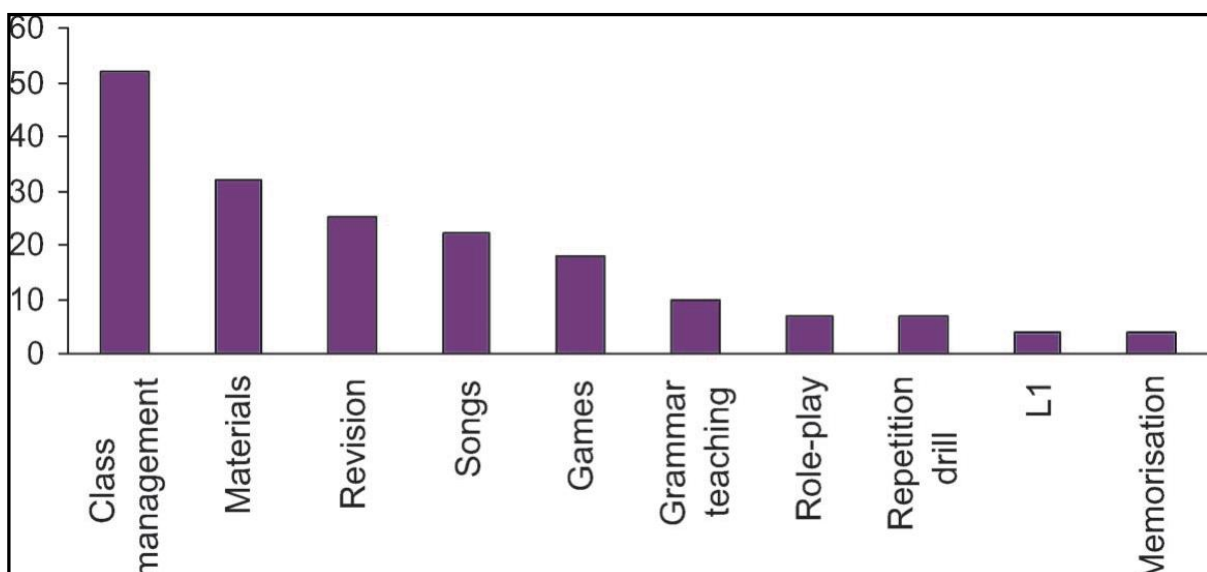
assignments as boring and ineffective activities. So, teachers may introduce such activities as editing of papers, phrases, or certain words written by other learners: Working in pairs or in groups may be interesting and effective.

Modern technologies contribute positively to the development of other fields and facilitation of the processes. When applied to the process of language acquisition, new technologies and devices help to make the process of communication and learning more exciting and engaging. Peterson (2012) suggested the use of the 3D multi-user virtual environment referred to as Second Life as an effective way of introducing the EFL learners to the informal communication and use of social speech, which is highly positive for the language proficiency growth. In this respect, the use of avatars, informal communication, giving and receiving feedbacks on posts can be rather engaging and interesting for young EFL learners. The 3D multi-user virtual environment is only one of the ways how modern technologies can make their way to the everyday life experiences of young EFL learners.

As learning styles of different people differ, these styles may differ since young years when children start their first language acquisition practices and gain absolutely new experiences. It is preferable to trace whether learning styles of adult EFL learners can be traced in young EFL learners with regard to their application in EFL teaching. For instance, Aliakbari and Mahjub (2010) analyzed gender differences in learning styles, strategies and preferences regarding the analytical approaches used by male learners and intuitive approaches applied by female learners. So, the same gender differences can be applied to young learners with regard to types of assignments and various guidelines, instructions, and visual aids used by language teachers to facilitate the memorization process.

The overall activities to be used with young EFL learners include storytelling, rhyming, playing games related to picking words, listing words starting with a specific letter or sound or containing a specific letter or sound. Actually, there are many different activities that may be applied by teachers in the context of EFL learners' interests. As reported in the study by Cakir (1999), musical activities are rather popular with young EFL learners including songs, rhymes, and games based on melodies and chants: "Carolyn Graham designed Jazz Chants to teach the natural rhythm, stress and intonation patterns of conversational American English" (Cakir 1999, n.p.). Though the findings by Cakir (1999) are not new and have been used many times, they are proved to be effective to make children interested, to make them memorize certain words, speech patterns, and grammatical patterns: The simplest rules can be repeated using a simple melody to make the young EFL learners acquire the material.

Though different topics may be more or less important for different teachers with regard to the area of their specialization and personal preferences, there are statistics regarding the most studied themes in language acquisition. As reported in



the study by Stelma and Onat-Stelma (2010), teachers may find it difficult to

organize the learning process or experience difficulties with some other areas of concern. The Table represents the Frequency of different topics in Imge's interview data (adapted from Stelma and Onat-Stelma 2010, p. 198). At the same time, it is understandable that "humans acquire language in only one way -- by understanding messages, or receiving 'comprehensible input'" (Cakir 1999, n.p.). By receiving messages from melodies and poems, young EFL learners may find it more interesting to develop their foreign language skills.

Conclusion

Differences between adult learners and young learners in the context of the EFL can be used to make the teaching strategies more effective when applied to specific categories of learners. Learning styles differ regardless of age, gender, and various preferences. Motivations as well as contexts, in which learners find themselves, can predetermine the way a learner would progress. At the same time, multiple studies report the effect produced by teachers' accents on young EFL learners and the way learners perceive information in case teachers are nonnative English language speakers.

The main ways in which EFL teaching should be adapted to the needs of young learners include the interest component, melody component, and sharing experience practice applied from the adult EFL learners' values. So, the interest of the young EFL learners may be created by the teacher with the help of engaging activities, such as games and storytelling. The melodies are integral parts of every EFL lesson to make the young EFL learners aware of the speech patterns in terms of melody, stress, rhythm, and other components of speech of native speakers. The process of sharing experiences is one of the parts liked by adult EFL learners in EFL courses: When applied to young EFL learners, it may be used to strengthen knowledge.

List of References

- Aliakbari, M., & Mahjub, E., 2010. Analytical/intuitive EFL learners and gender effect. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning*, 6 (1), p. 41-48.
- Butler, Y. G., 2007. How are nonnative-English-speaking teachers perceived by young learners? *TESOL*, 41 (4), p. 731-755.
- Cakir, A., 1999. Musical activities for young learners of EFL. *The Internet TESL Journal*, [online]. V(11), Available at: <http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Cakir-MusicalActivities.html> [accessed 12 March 2013].
- Diehr, B., & Rymarczyk, J., 2010. Researching literacy in a foreign language among primary school learners. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Fortune, A., & Andon, N., 2012. Editorial. *Language Teaching Research*, 16 (2), p. 165-169.
- Gorsuch, G., & Taguchi, E., 2010. Developing reading fluency and comprehension using repeated reading: evidence from longitudinal student reports. *Language Teaching Research*, 14 (1), p. 27-59.
- Mercer, S., 2011. The beliefs of two expert EFL learners. *Language Learning Journal*, 39 (1), p. 57-74.
- Panova, I., & Lyster, R., 2002. Patterns of corrective feedback and uptake in an adult ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36 (4), p. 573-595.
- Peterson, M., 2012. EFL learner collaborative interaction in Second Life. *ReCALL*, 24 (1), p. 20-39.
- Stelma, J., & Onat-Stelma, Z., 2010. Foreign language teachers organising learning during their first year of teaching young learners. *Language Learning Journal*, 38 (2), p. 193-207.