Adapting Teaching to Suit Young Learners

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Teaching Languages to Young Learners

In your view, what are the most important ways in which young learners differ from adult learners in the context of EFL teaching? Outline three main ways in which EFL teaching needs to be adapted to the needs of young learners.

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(excluding tables, references and appendix)

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1. Introduction

Teaching younger English Language Learners (YELLs) in South Korea requires a special skill set, patience, intuition, a sense of humour and a willingness to adapt when necessary. Korean YELLs are often placed into private language programs because their parents wish it because the view for most parents is that English proficiency and good test results are indicative of future success in South Korea. Koreans spend a lot of money on studying English with the Korean private English education market estimated at as much as 15 trillion won ($15 billion) annually. Some families spend over 100,000 won ($100) per month on English education (Kang, 2008). The teacher, in accommodating the wishes of the parents, administration, and/or the Board of Education may be asked to teach in ways that conflict with what might be beneficial to the younger learners’ linguistic development.

A teacher’s job could involve a frustrating mix of educating, entertaining students and/or controlling their behaviour. Compounding this issue of conflicting demands, Cameron (2001) states that it is not content but classroom methods, which influence how successful children are in acquiring foreign language ability. Thus the teacher is held accountable (according to Cameron, 2001) for the majority of the responsibility of children’s success in language learning and needs to think carefully about which methods will be used. A flexible and well-informed teacher can however, accommodate both the learners and the institutions in which learning occurs.

This paper will first aim to identify younger learners in Korea in section 2 followed by section 3, which will then indicate the differences between them and Korean adult language learners. Section 4 will aim to inform teachers how to react to the increasing demands of the ELT profession in Korea by highlighting ways in which the classroom, the coursebook and the teaching of grammar can be adapted to suit younger learners. A personal teaching journal
will be referenced throughout to present specific examples of positive and negative results stemming from these adaptations.

2. Younger Learners in South Korea

In the private afterschool elementary English language program in Korea where insights into teaching young learners were acquired, most learners are between seven to twelve years of age. They meet with the Korean English teacher three times a week and the native teacher twice, each class lasting forty minutes. Most first year students will have had little to no exposure to spoken English except through advertisements or foreign films. Usually, the first two years of the after school elementary English program are spent teaching students the alphabet and phonics. Simple words and sentences are the norm and communication is limited at best. As students progress through third and fourth year, they begin to communicate more effectively and can talk about themselves and their day. By fifth and sixth grades, there are fewer interruptions as students can express their ideas without too much hesitation or difficulty. The next sections will now seek to clearly identify some of the major differences between YELLs and adult learners.

3. How children and adults differ in the Korean EFL context

This section will focus on general learner characteristics, attention span, motivational requirements for YELLs, and how children and adults process grammar and organize lexical items differently.

3.1 Learner Characteristics

In the EFL classroom, Halliwell (1992:3) states that children arrive equipped with a set of “instincts, skills and characteristics” which aid them in acquiring foreign languages. However, when these skills are not fully developed or when YELLs lack the “cognitive
maturity or metalinguistic awareness” (Lightbown and Spada, 2006:30) that adults have, it can be difficult for YELLs to make educated guesses as to how languages work.

On the other hand, adults often make mistakes as a result of this awareness. Examples include using different Subject-Verb-Object order when speaking in English. Because standard Korean word order is Subject-Object-Verb, word order errors are some of the most common mistakes found in Korean adult learners (Cha, 1990; Nelson and Chun, 2004). Lightbown and Spada (2006) found that most mistakes made by language learners are because of L1 interference especially when learners are in frequent contact with other learners who make the same mistakes.

Children are more willing to take chances than adults, even when “proficiency is quite limited” (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 31). In addition to word order and inhibition, children pay attention to language forms in a spontaneous and unintentional way while adult attention to form is more deliberate. YELLs do have the ability however, to detect inauthentic, canned or meaningless language and generally cannot tolerate language that does hold immediate use or reward (Brown, 2001).

3.1.1 Attention Span

Paying attention is an important part of the language learning process and children cannot “give as selective and prolonged attention to features of learning tasks…and are more easily diverted and distracted” (Cameron, 2001:15). Thus they will require shorter activity and class times than adults. In any classroom filled with younger learners, the students need to be made immediately aware of why they are partaking in a particular activity. The activities, tasks and/or games need to be child-centred or focused on the learners. Paul (2003) finds: children are naturally active learners always searching for meaning and teaching eventually drives this natural, active curiosity down. Even something as simple as relabeling tasks as “missions”
might motivate the students to complete them. With adults, such language activities might appear childish, rendering such tactics unlikely to encourage participation.

3.1.2 Motivation

Teachers may not be able to directly affect intrinsic motivation but can positively affect attitudes and when motivation wanes, the teacher can ensure that the classroom is a supportive, stimulating, engaging, age and culturally appropriate place that fosters a feeling of success (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). Adults can alleviate fatigue or boredom by taking a coffee break or asking to leave the classroom temporarily whereas younger students are “doers” (Holderness, 1991:18) and need to be actively engaged throughout the lesson.

It is often in moments of fatigue, restlessness or stress where teachers may experience unruly or problematic behaviour from students and section 4.1.1 (see table 3) will address ways in which a teacher can address the needs of more problematic students and retain attention for greater duration. Turning towards grammar and lexical organization, the following section will identify some of the differences between children and adult understanding of language.

3.2 Grammar and Lexical Organization

In order to limit the scope and avoid unnecessary confusion, Cameron’s (2001:99) definition of grammar and vocabulary will be used. She suggests that for foreign language learners, it is first necessary to compartmentalize language and by doing so, creating “word-sized bits” known as vocabulary and how those bits fit together to produce language is known as “grammar”.

Unlike adults, younger learners are still learning about grammar through their own first language and may not be ready for explicit grammar instruction or meta-language (Cameron, 2001). Although YELLS have begun to develop some of Halliwell’s (1992:3) “instincts and
skills”, they still have much to learn about grammar and life in general (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). A YELL may not understand the difference between an adjective and adverb and therefore require a different approach to the way grammar is taught and learned. Children do however have more time to ingest language and without need to confuse the learner with technical labels. They can instead learn grammar “slowly and meaningfully” (Cameron, 2001:121) over the course of their lifetime initially requiring less attention paid to explicit instruction.

Children may not require explicit grammar instruction but they will need access to rich vocabulary and comprehensible input as Brown (2007: 47) finds, “children react consistently to the deep structure and the communicative function of language and do not react overtly to expansions and grammatical corrections”. Regarding lexical items, Elbers (1988) provides examples of how YELLs categorize things very differently from adults. Cameron (1994) then converts the same examples into adult-type definitions illustrating how adults and children differ in their most basic definitions of things:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic/Subject</th>
<th>Child Definition</th>
<th>Adult Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gasoline</td>
<td>milk for the car</td>
<td>a substance that makes engines work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stars</td>
<td>suns that live at night</td>
<td>objects in the night sky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>a mother who is a man</td>
<td>a male parent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: adapted from Elbers (1988) and Cameron (1994)

To continue with Elbers’ and Cameron’s ideas, I asked my youngest students to tell me how to describe two other items either easily identifiable or available to most people and paired them with some common responses from my adult students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic/Subject</th>
<th>Child Definition</th>
<th>Adult Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banana</td>
<td>a monkey fruit</td>
<td>a sweet yellow fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chopsticks</td>
<td>food helper</td>
<td>utensils for use with eating</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Personal Teaching Journal (February 2011)
These definitions show how YELL’s limited experience and underdeveloped perceptions of the world are very different from adult worldviews (Cameron, 1994) and provide insight into how they categorize objects.

In addition to understanding that differences in learner characteristics, grammar, and lexis exist between children and adults, some adaptations must be made. The following sections will outline three ways for materials to be adapted for YELLs.

4. Adapting Materials

There are many ways for teachers to adapt their materials to make them more suitable for younger learners and the following sections will address learning situations specific to the classroom, followed by coursebook adaptations and finally, grammar instruction.

4.1 Adapting the Classroom

In the YELL classroom, teachers need to be prepared for a number of situations that can occur. Inattentive, unmotivated and unruly students can pose numerous problems for the teacher and preparation is the only way to prevent or accommodate these problems when and where they happen. The following sections will discuss the difficulties of adapting classroom management and ways in which the teacher can use the L1 to help clarify, establish rapport or communicate with students.

4.1.1 Classroom Behaviour: Praise, Rewards and Punishment

For many teachers, this aspect of classroom adaptation is the most difficult. Children get distracted more easily than adults and some children may exhibit deep-rooted problems that the teacher may not be trained or prepared to handle. “There is a reason behind every behaviour” (Paul, 2003: 124) and the teacher must determine which reactions are necessary if any, to particular behaviours that occur in the classroom. It seems only natural that a teacher
should praise attentive young learners and discipline those who act inappropriately during a lesson. Appropriate reactions to some behaviours however, are not immediately evident and this section will discuss the implications of using praise, rewards and punishment in the L2 classroom.

Paul asserts that rewards can “weaken interest... weaken active learning...[and] are shallow and divisive” (2003: 115-6). The question remains, how are teachers to maintain effective classroom management without the use of candy, stickers or rewards in general? Instead of physical rewards, teachers can envision the classroom as a game-like atmosphere making the material less stressful and creating a feeling of interest. Holderness (1991) describes games as forces that motivate children to act and can act as learning aides. YELLs learn better through games (Rixon, 1991) and games provide opportunities for interaction, which lead to the development of language skills (Khan, 1991).

Teachers can enliven any classroom with a game when deemed appropriate as a highly effective tool for motivation and good behaviour. Indeed, the seeming reward of a game can serve to further strengthen the YELL’s uptake of the target material (Singer et al 2006, Serl, 2010). The idea of adapting the reward system seems uncomplicated but it is linked with praise, and it is in changing one’s perception of the way praise is to be used within the classroom that can be more difficult.

Henderlong and Lepper researching the effects of praise on children found some indications that praise was “ineffective and sometimes dysfunctional (2002: 774).” Other studies indicate that the problem with praise is that it is inherently a value judgment and that some students will behave poorly simply to prove the teacher wrong (Faber and Mazlish, 1995). I found upon further use and reflection of praise that: “My students don’t seem too interested
in learning the target language…only in trying to please me as a teacher. I can’t figure out why they don’t try to simply get the information from other students instead of racing to show me that they had written something down” (personal teaching journal, December 2010).

By slowly reducing the amount of praise given thereby eliminating the need for students to please or impress, they became more motivated and ultimately more interested in understanding how to successfully complete a task or mission.

Conversely, children can at times infuriate even the most patient teacher and the way in which a teacher reacts to an unruly or disruptive student can leave an unforgettable impression of not only the teacher and English but of learning itself. Corporal punishment is legal in South Korean schools and allows the discipline of students in situations “deemed necessary for education” (Global Initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children, 2009). However, avoidance of such punishment is clearly the best option and Paul (2003) provides some techniques to pre-empt problems that may arise during class:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treat YELLS as real people</th>
<th>Remember student names; participate in games; provide a relaxed learning environment; allow student ownership of “our class”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ensure Success</td>
<td>Develop achievable, comprehensible learning targets, if necessary divide goals into smaller steps;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set a good example</td>
<td>Avoid open clashes with students, forgive and forget: if a disagreement occurs, control anger and move on with the lesson; keep the room tidy and expect the children to respect the classroom as well</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Prepared</td>
<td>Prepare lessons and stay ahead of the children, as they are quick to take advantage of an unprepared teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: adapted from Paul (2003)

By reducing the frequency in use of rewards, praise and punishment, I found a student body more willing to take risks, searching less for teacher approval and more interested in finding information or completing missions. Adapting to a new system with fewer rewards, praise and limited punishment appeared frustrating initially but the results over time have shown “greater participation, focus and a willingness to try new things” (personal teaching journal,
4.1.2 Limited Use of L1 in the classroom

Despite children being well equipped with skills (aforementioned in section 3.1) to help them learn foreign languages, these skills may not be readily available or developed for immediate use in the L2. As a result, the L1 can be used in a limited capacity to help with the L2 language learning process. Carless found while studying YELLs that “L1 use or code-switching from the L2 to L1 or vice versa is a common feature in EFL world-wide, and is a natural act which, if used judiciously by teachers or pupils, seems to make a positive contribution to the learning process” (2002: 392).

Sometimes the L1 is necessary and Harbord (1992) found three ways in which the L1 could be used with YELLs (on a limited basis) either as a means of communication, to foster teacher-student relationships or help with learning the L2. Adults in my classroom require the use of L1 much less frequently and understand the inclination not to use it in the classroom, many feeling that its use might defeat the purpose of learning the L2. Children however, may need comfort and familiarity at times and the L1 can provide them. Understandably, L1 may not be an option for teachers who are not familiar with it or are new to the EFL country.

4.2 Adapting the coursebook

This section will highlight the ways in which a course book can be adapted or augmented to provide a culturally sensitive alternative to materials found within some of the international English language textbooks available for Korean YELLs. Halliwell asks two questions when determining which content to use and when to look elsewhere for better materials. “What does the coursebook do well...[and]…what does the teacher do better” (1992:113). Once the teacher has answered these two questions the focus can shift to what other materials can
supplement or improve the activities within the coursebook.

4.2.1 Using the course book as one of many materials

The coursebook for a class need not be the only resource a teacher uses, but one of many. In Gray’s (2002) study concerning the adaptation and deletion of material in coursebooks, he surveyed teachers and discovered that some of them had in some shape or form, omitted or adapted materials due to a cultural mismatch or insensitivity. He then recommended teachers to regard coursebooks as “cultural artefacts”, and “critically engage” them as to ensure that the material does not risk offending students (ibid: 276).

Hutchinson and Torres (1994) found that neither teachers nor learners follow the coursebook verbatim and instead add, adapt or delete the materials to fit their own needs. Overall, the teachers interpret what is useful based on the assessment of their own students’ needs during a specific lesson or throughout the course. Apple (1992: 10) adds that learners also “accept, reinterpret, and reject what counts as legitimate knowledge selectively.”

A means to adapt a coursebook is Cameron’s (2001) theme-based teaching; using a particular unit, chapter or section as a springboard for other activities. One such example was a unit built around foods around the world. In this situation, the chunk “do you like?” was paired with familiar foods found easily in South Korea. Complementing Cameron’s springboard idea, Halliwell’s (1992) graph was used to create a pseudo-communicative survey where students were asked to provide answers to questions about foods they liked or disliked with other input items such as “yes I do” or “no I don’t”. Students were then free to fill in the last blank space with a food of their choice.
Do you like…?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Carrots</th>
<th>Garlic</th>
<th>Cheese</th>
<th>Cabbage</th>
<th>Apples</th>
<th>Student choice</th>
</tr>
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Table 4: Adapted classroom survey (drawings from Halliwell, 1992:117)

When adapting the content of the book is not sufficient, teachers will need to look elsewhere for supplementary materials to use with YELLs. The next section will focus on using storybooks as a tool to complement or replace the coursebook.

**4.2.2 Supplementing with Realia: Storybooks**

Supplementing or temporarily replacing the course book with stories, comic books or children’s magazines (realia) are great ways to break from the coursebook and offer children an authentic glimpse into the English-speaking world or how children there really use English. Ghosn (2002) finds that traditional EFL materials may not always be suitable to teach literacy to YELLs whereas authentic fictional stories read for enjoyment may be used to motivate, foster vocabulary development in context, stimulate spoken language, and enrich a YELL’s experience with English language learning.

I therefore decided to experiment using a story in my class that I enjoyed as a young elementary student in an effort to create rapport with them. I intended to offer my YELLs access to books they would not ordinarily find in their local bookstore and wanted to show
them positive ways of expressing frustration. I chose “Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day” (Viorst, 1972) which would show them that children from an English speaking background share the same, anger, frustration and uncertainty when everything seems to be going wrong. It would be used as “a rich resource to introduce and review vocabulary and sentence structures in a memorable and meaningful context” (Brewster et al. 2002; cited in Sheu 2008:47). Some of the phrases included “I could tell it was going to be a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day” and “I think I’ll move to Australia” (Viorst, 1972: 1-3).

In line with Sheu’s (ibid) findings, where teachers found “linguistic value, the value of the story, and the value of the picture” in story books, the children found enjoyment in the new words they could use to express frustration, the feelings they shared with the young boy and the drawings provided laughs. One example especially struck a chord with the kids: “There were lima beans for dinner and I hate limas. There was kissing on TV and I hate kissing” (Viorst, 1972: 27). Storybooks can also be used as a means to show how grammar works in a natural setting and the next section will address the ways in which teachers can present grammar in a comprehensible and interesting way.

4.3 Adapting Grammar Instruction

Cameron (2001) suggests that younger children cannot benefit much from explicit grammar instruction and urges teachers to find opportunities for grammar learning that arise during the course of the class either through games, songs, tasks or other activities. She also advises teachers to remember that for YELLS, meaning is imperative and grammar can aid to express specific meanings.

Pinter (2006:85) agrees and further suggests that, “grammar emerges from meaningful contexts…and that meaningful communication…leads to focus on grammar”. Children
organize their ideas and find meaning in different ways and teachers can use meaningful communication as a tool to present grammar, eliminating the need for technical labels (Cameron, 2001).

4.3.1 Student-Designed Activities

As a means of communication, student-designed charts, surveys, and drawings can help to ensure student ownership and interest. Halliwell, (1992) emphasises presenting grammar in a comprehensible, non-confusing manner and provides a system where no grammatical language is necessary. An example of a grammar set in question is prepositions of place. A student may or may not know how to use the prepositions: on, in, next to, under or behind but the students can draw within their respective rooms to show exactly where each item is located. The students can then attempt to draw their partners’ rooms, kitchens or living rooms without looking at the drawings.

Examples of additional lexical items that can be used include guitars, baseballs, and computers among other things one would find in a YELLS bedroom or any other room in the apartment. Upon using similar ideas, my students identified with the project, took pride in recreating their bedrooms and explaining the layout wherein. In summation, grammar instruction can be adapted to provide opportunities for YELLS to understand it in a meaningful context that is fun for both the students to learn and the teacher to present (see table 5 on page following).
5. Conclusion

Children are different from adults but treating them as helpless language learners without direction will not help in their journey towards greater English ability. Children require more care, concern, compassion and discipline than adult students but can provide arguably more delight in the classroom. It is important to understand that children have not only linguistic needs but emotional needs as well and a teacher should be as prepared as possible to accommodate YELLS should those needs manifest themselves in the classroom.

In this paper, I have investigated the major differences between children and adult learners in South Korea and outlined some areas where adaptation may be helpful in an effort to provide some alternatives to EFL teachers in Korea and elsewhere. Adapting the classroom, coursebook and the teaching of grammar are only a few of the ways teachers can make teaching more suitable for YELLS. As Brown (2001) suggests, it takes a special person to teach YELLS and a teacher who is willing to find ways of adapting teaching to make English a more enjoyable subject to learn will be greatly rewarded.
References


Brumfit, C., Moon, J. & Tongue, R. (Eds.), *Teaching English to children: From practice to principle*. London: Collins ELT.


Personal Teaching Journal Excerpts (2009-2011)