Teaching Young Learners:
Adapting the classroom for YELLS

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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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1. INTRODUCTION
Teaching a foreign language requires educators to recognize the needs of their students. The requirements of adult learners differ greatly from those of young English language learners (YELLS). By identifying their needs, teachers can then adapt various factors in the classroom in order to have the greatest impact on YELL learning.

This paper will review the available literature on YELLS. It will then examine ways in which motivation, task-based learning and materials can be adapted to the needs of young learners.

2. YOUNG ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS
The way YELLS process information in their native language (L1) as well as in the foreign language (L2) differs from adults. From an early age, children first begin to sort out words involving concrete objects. When introduced into the L2 classroom, they “need very concrete vocabulary that connects with objects they can handle or see” (Cameron 2001: 81). In contrast, adult learners are able to cope with abstract ideas (ibid).

YELLS do not comprehend abstract ideas such as grammar. Bourke (2006: 280) notes that young learners don’t have a concept of ideas such as parts of speech, discourse or phonology. Adult learners have the benefit of understanding these concepts through their knowledge of the L1. Any attempt to explain these abstract concepts at an early age will likely serve only to confuse YELLS. Howatt (1991: 293) found, in a study on the history of language learning, that learning which concentrated prematurely on these abstract forms “meant that linguistic forms became divorced from the meaning they were meant to convey”.

In order to avoid dealing with abstract ideas, Cameron (2001: 53) recommends dealing with topics children find familiar, such as family and friends or school life. Since they
have a clear mental image of these objects or activities, it is easier for them to process the information in the L2.

YELLS work to develop a clear mental image using the language they are given in the L1 as well as the L2. One way of doing this is through their use of private speech. This takes place when children mutter to themselves when undertaking various activities (Wertsch cited in Cameron 2001: 5). As they get older, children develop a better understanding of language. Their private speech becomes ‘internalized’ (Cameron 2001: 7).

Research on private speech in the L1 has proved a link between the use of private speech and academic achievement (Cameron 2001: 196). This is likely because the children think about the language, produce it, and hear it again. This will help to reinforce their mental image of the task at hand. The mechanism of internal speech helps children when working without the aid of a teacher. Its benefits can be further facilitated with a teacher’s assistance through the use of scaffolding.

2.1. SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding has come about through the research of Vygotsky and Bruner. Vygotsky originally developed the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This theory suggests that students should be judged on what they can do with the assistance of an expert rather than what they are capable of doing on their own (Cameron 2001: 6). Students can be given language that is within their potential to learn rather than language they are already familiar with. “If... new language is within a child’s ZPD, she or he will make sense of it and start the process of internalizing it” (ibid).

Vygotsky’s research on ZPD influenced Bruner. He developed the theory of scaffolding, which is the language “adults use... to mediate the world for children and help them solve problems” (cited in Cameron 2001: 8). This is an important idea in L2 training. By “directing attention on in remembering the whole task and goals on behalf of the
learner, the teacher is doing what children are not yet able to do for themselves” (Cameron 2001: 9). The students can be aided in their tasks until the language has become internalized. When this happens, the YELLS have developed a clear mental image using the language they are given, and no longer need the scaffolding.

2.2. CRITICAL PERIOD HYPOTHESIS

One idea that has gained a lot of attention over the last several decades is the critical period hypothesis. This idea states that children up until the age of puberty are able to learn a second language with greater ease than older learners. This has led to an increase in younger children learning foreign languages.

Not all educators are convinced of the validity of this theory. Lightbown and Spada (2001: 41) state 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 for learning”. While it lies outside the scope of this paper to confirm or deny its validity, it is important to understand, because it has had a definite impact on the age many students begin English language training.

3. YELL MOTIVATION

Research has proven that “motivation is one of the main determinates of second/foreign language learning achievement” (Dörnyei 1994: 273). Several types of motivation must be considered. Intrinsic motivation relates to a learner who has a desire to do something regardless of external pressures. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, involves outside forces that want the learner to complete a task. Motivation can be further broken down into integrative and instrumental types. Integrative motivation relates to a student wanting to interact with people, using the target language. Instrumental motivation is evident when there are specific tasks that
the learner wishes to be able to do. The relationship between these different kinds of motivation can be seen in figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intrinsic</th>
<th>Extrinsic</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Integrative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 learner wishes to integrate</td>
<td>Someone else wishes the L2 learner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>with the L2 culture</td>
<td>to know the L2 for integrative</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 learner wishes to achieve</td>
<td>External power wants L2 learner to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals utilizing L2</td>
<td>learn L2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 - Motivational dichotomies (Bailey cited in Brown 2007: 174)

YELL and adult learners are typically motivated in different ways. Adults have more opportunities to become intrinsically or integratively motivated. In a study of university EFL students, Thomson (2010) found that close to 90% of those questioned felt that learning English will allow them to get better jobs. The study also found that over 50% wanted to get to know native English speakers better (ibid). These are both examples of older learners being intrinsically motivated. The former is instrumental, and the latter is integrative motivation.

In contrast, YELLS studying in an EFL situation are unlikely to be integratively motivated. They will have little contact with native English speakers outside of the classroom. Since children deal mostly with concrete ideas, abstract notions of integrating with people outside of their culture in the future will have little or no effect on their motivation. YELL motivation is largely derived from a desire to perform well on tests, or because their parents or instructors want them to learn the language. The former is intrinsic and instrumental motivation, and the latter is extrinsic and instrumental. Motivation which is extrinsic and instrumental has been proven to be the least effective form (Brown 2007: 172-174).
Since YELLs are less likely to be effectively motivated, instilling motivation in them is especially important. At the early stages of language learning, when students find the lessons to be “difficult, or boring, or a waste of time, then secondary teachers will not only need to keep pupils motivated... they will also have to remotivate those who already feel they cannot succeed in language learning” (Cameron 2003: 106). As YELLs become older learners, those that have been successfully motivated at a young age will be more likely to succeed because they will need less aid from their instructors to become remotivated. The following section will look at what the instructors can do in the classroom to motivate YELLs.

3.1. CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Since YELLs are less likely to be motivated than older learners, it is up to the teachers to develop pedagogical strategies to aid them. One way this can be done is through setting up goals for the students. “Oxford and Shearin argue that in order to function as efficient motivators, goals should be specific, hard but achievable, accepted by the students, and accompanied by feedback about progress” (Dörnyei 1994: 276). In YELL classrooms, goals can be posted in the classroom, and checked off as the students accomplish them. This provides a visual cue for the students showing them how much they have been able to accomplish. Providing feedback on the goals will also aid understanding of accomplishments. The students can observe that while they are still not able to complete some classroom tasks with the same ease as other students, progress is still being made. Teachers can monitor these goals and adjust lessons to make sure that all of the students will be able to achieve them.

Monitoring the class and adjusting lessons accordingly is an important tool for teachers. Cameron (2003: 111) argues that “if the children are to be kept attentive and mentally active, the teacher must be alert and adaptive to their responses to tasks, adjusting
activities and exploiting language learning opportunities that arise on the spot”. Being able to diverge from a set lesson plan will allow for greater learning opportunities.

Teachers can adapt lessons through the use of stir and settle activities (Halliwell 1992: 20). When a teacher finds that students’ attention begins to wander, or they are becoming more reticent, the activity needs to be switched to one that is more active. This can renew interest in the lesson. Activities such as oral work, competitions, games or any activity that requires the students to stand up and move about all stir the classroom.

Playing games in the classroom raises students’ interest and motivation to participate in class. It is important to remember that these games need to relate to the language being learned, and “act as a pivot point to more genuine communication” (Bourke 2006: 281). One good way of getting students to review vocabulary is to play a memory or category game. Students can sit in a circle a start to say words one by one based on the topic of the lesson. The students continue one by one to say different words on the topic until one student cannot think of a word, or repeats what another students has said. They are then “out” and the game continues, or the game resets using a different topic, typically from a previous lesson. One variation of this is when the students say their word, and then subsequent students must say all of the preceding words before saying their own word.

In situations when the students become more rowdy or too noisy, settle activities need to be applied. This will be anything that will focus the students’ attention on something in front of them, and reduces interaction with the other students. Reading tasks, or if their level allows for it, any kinds of writing are examples of settle activities. When the students are involved in producing something on their own, the classroom mood will become more subdued.
Motivation and motivating students clearly plays a large role in YELL classrooms. Another way that the classroom can be adapted for younger learners is through the implementation of task based learning. The next section will look at this in more detail.

4. Task Based Learning

Task based learning is a student-centred, rather than a teacher-centred teaching philosophy. It is “based on the simple fact that it is the learner who does the learning and that the teacher’s role is to facilitate the learning process” (Bourke 2006: 286). This supports the ideas of Vygotsky and Bruner which were outlined in section 2.1. Skehan (cited in Willis and Willis 2007: 12) defines a task as any activity in which:

- Meaning is primary
- Learners are not given other people’s meanings to regurgitate
- There is some sort of relationship to comparable real world activities
- Task completion has some sort of priority
- The assessment of the task is in terms of outcome

The first two points on Skehan’s list state that form is not as important in language learning as meaningful output. If students are continually drilled on form rather than meaning, they will become less able to deal with the uncertainty that is involved in producing new language for the first time. As Rubin and Thompson (cited in Brown 1994: 192) found in their research on language learning, being able to deal with this uncertainty in the language is vital to become a better language learner. YELLS that are given tasks which focus on meaning will be able to increase their uncertainty tolerance, which will aid them as they get older and advance in their studies of the language.

In order to retain the focus on meaning rather than form, scaffolding can be implemented to aid the students. The instructor can provide enough information about the task to make the students understand what needs to be accomplished. The
students will then be able to “explore certain aspects of a certain topic and the language associated with it” (Bourke 2006: 282). This will push the students into their ZPD, maximizing the language learning potential of completing the task.

YELL and adult classrooms differ in the way scaffolding is applied when doing tasks. Due to YELLS having a very limited worldview, they will require more specific scaffolding to make them understand how to accomplish a task. When doing speaking tasks, this is magnified because “young speakers between five and ten years lack awareness of how to cater for other participants in discourse, and are not very skillful in planning their talk” (Cameron 2001: 52). The teacher will need to provide a good framework for a conversation to ensure that the children are able to complete the task. Adults are more attuned to the give and take nature of conversation based on their knowledge of the L1, and will need less scaffolding to complete these tasks.

The fourth and fifth points made by Skehan in the description of tasks relate to the outcome. YELLS need to be permitted to express their opinions on what the desired outcome should be. This will enhance the students’ motivation to complete the task. If “the teacher gives little value to the conclusions that students have reached and moves on rapidly to another activity, this will detract from the importance of outcome” (Willis and Willis 2007: 15).

As stated previously in section 3.1, setting goals is an effective way to motivate students. This is easily adapted to tasks which are working towards an outcome. The teacher can set the goal of the day’s lesson to be to arrive at the students’ desired outcome of the task at hand. The students will understand that they are able to accomplish more with the target language at the end of the lesson than they were at the beginning.

The final point that Skehan makes about tasks is that they need to have a real world application. When designing lessons for students, teachers should create tasks that “have a clear pedagogic relationship to out-of-class language use, in that needs analysis
should clarify how students will need to use language in real-life, and task design should ensure that classroom tasks bear a developmental relationship to such non-classroom activity” (Skehan 1996: 39). By relating the task to the students’ real life experiences, the validity of achieving an outcome is emphasized, which in turn increases their motivation.

Task-based activities for YELLs are different from those created for older learners. Older learners deal with a wider range of situations outside of classrooms, allowing them to deal with a wider range of topics. Teachers need to keep in mind what the YELLs are likely to do outside of the classroom to create tasks specific to those events. These are situations such as interacting with their friends or family, and activities the children will be doing at school or with other organizations.

YELLs benefit from doing tasks because it provides opportunities for them to use private speech. In situations where they are working on tasks by themselves, if the “children do use the foreign language to mutter to themselves while they are working on activities, they will get extra practice in selecting and adapting language” (Cameron 2001: 197). Adult learners do not gain this benefit from tasks since their knowledge of the L1 has internalized their language.

When doing tasks, there will be a certain amount of L1 use in the classroom. Students will need to communicate with their classmates, and they will not have the language skills to do everything they want in the L2. Carless (2002: 393) argues that this needs to be accepted as long as the students are working at constructing an English language product. It is only when the L1 is used more than the L2 that the teacher needs to adjust the task to motivate the students to use the target language (ibid).

Student behavior is another factor to consider when doing task based exercises with YELLs. In order for communicative tasks to function properly, teachers need to “tolerate some laxity in noise and discipline standards” (Carless 2002:390). When younger
students have a lot of energy, noise levels will naturally increase, and there is the potential for disagreements to break out between the students. It can prove difficult in these circumstances to create a balance between completing a task and maintaining good behaviour (Carless 2002:391). Teachers need to monitor these situations and adjust the task if the classroom behavior becomes unproductive.

So far this paper has looked at the effects of motivation and tasks as they relate to YELLS. The next section will look at how the instructors can work within the confines of a textbook, and how to use texts to benefit young learners.

5. YELL MATERIALS

In any ELT classroom, the textbook plays a large role in how the class is taught. This is especially important for YELLS, since their “previous knowledge is incomplete or inaccurate, and they rely on texts to supply knowledge” (Cameron 2001: 128). Thus it is important for educators to select texts which will provide the knowledge that is most applicable to their classroom.

Teachers need to have a say in the textbooks that are chosen for the classes in order for the textbook to match the students’ needs. In situations where teachers are not able to participate in choosing textbooks, there is an increased probability for YELLS to be provided with materials that are not appropriate, or uninteresting.

Using interesting texts is an important factor in keeping students’ attention and retaining their motivation to learn. McGrath (2002: 107) describes good texts as those that “tell us something we do not know; they contain interesting content; they provoke a reaction. They are multiply exploitable because they lend themselves to tasks which are interesting as well as useful”. Properly exploiting good texts often requires teachers to adapt or augment them with a variety of other tasks or materials. The next section will look at how textbooks can be adapted to benefit young learners.
5.1. **Adapting Course Books**

Planning lessons for YELLs to incorporate recycling of materials previously learnt will aid them in internalizing vocabulary and structures. White (1988: 80) states that “a good syllabus, like a good curriculum, should incorporate recycling so that the learners are given an opportunity to revise items previously learnt”. This recycling should not merely be across chapters or units but continue through the years as the YELLs progress in their language learning (Cameron 2001: 91). This can be used to great effect by teachers that have the advantage of teaching the same children for extended periods of time.

One effective way that Cameron (2001: 91) contends that recycling can be implemented is by “changing the background or situational content” of a given lesson. For example, if a lesson involves a variety of foods, and discusses likes and dislikes, the teacher can review sports, kinds of music, colours, or any other groups of nouns taught previously.

Another way the teacher can augment the textbook is by adding vocabulary to the textbook. Cameron notes that this “idea of moving outwards from a given topic is very powerful in adjusting a text book to suit learners” (ibid). A lesson dealing with buying something from a store can be expanded by talking about different kinds of stores, products in the stores, people that work there and modifiers for various items. This can be very successful strategy as long as the teacher keeps the YELLs age in consideration, and does not provide situations with which the children would not normally associate.

Adapting strategies can make a textbook much more interesting, and provide a wider base of knowledge for the students. In situations where this is not enough, the teacher must supplement the text book with other materials.

5.2. **Supplementing with Storybooks**

Using storybooks with YELLs is an effective way to get students to practice reading and comprehension skills. If the learners are not yet able to read, they can work on listening
skills by having the teacher or more advanced students read the text. When the students have developed sufficient reading skills “the books children can read are visible signs of their accomplishment, and have the effect of motivating both the students and their parents” (Dlugosz 2000: 289).

After reading storybooks, students are often given follow up exercises such as comprehension questions to make sure they have understood the story. For very young students, this can be complicated since “very little use of the written form is appropriate, because the demands [are]... altogether too high” (Cameron 2001: 67). The teacher must, therefore, find alternate ways of checking comprehension.

One way to test comprehension is to find out what the students’ mental picture of the story is. This can be easily accomplished by having the students make cartoons of the action as they understood it. In order to make a cartoon, the students must have a basic grasp of the story, understanding who, where and what took place. They will be able to express what they know through their drawings.

The cartoon approach has many benefits. Younger students often enjoy drawing and colouring, and through trying to understand a story and relay what they know, they are doing what they enjoy while working on comprehension skills. This will motivate the students to complete the task. They will also be able to look at other students’ work and see if their mental image of the story matches up. When the task is completed, the students will know that they have read a story and understood it, even if they are not yet able to reproduce the language. Following cartoon activities, teachers can then put the students’ work in big books, use them as visual displays on the classroom walls, or put them online for parents to see (Cameron 2001: 194). This will further serve to increase students’ motivation.
6. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the issues with teaching YELLs, and how they differ from older learners. The main three ways the classroom needs to be adapted for young learners is through motivation, task-based activities that relate to students’ lives outside the classroom, and application of textbooks and accompanying materials. These are discrete, yet related issues. Interesting materials can improve motivation, tasks can supplement textbooks, and everything is improved with increased motivation.

The issues discussed can be used to plan lessons and syllabuses that will engage younger learners. Designing lessons that keep in mind the YELLs interests and ability to process information will lead to successful learning that will hopefully continue as they get older and progress in their studies.
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