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Teaching the World's Children ESL for Ages Three to Seven

THE TRANSITION FROM HOME TO SCHOOL, WHETHER IT OCCURS AT A PRESCHOOL or in kindergarten or grade one, marks an important turning point in terms of language development. At home, children develop both their physical and conversational skills in unstructured circumstances. The greater part of their experience is often with one caregiver. Even when more than one is involved, the number is usually limited and they are delighted to focus exclusively on the child. Learning, although it is spontaneous and unstructured, is nevertheless steady and involving for the child.

The function of schools is to broaden children's range of experiences, introduce new possibilities, systematize the process of learning, help develop thinking skills and, ultimately, empower students to take responsibility for their own learning. The strategies children have developed at home to make sense of their world, to

talk about their experiences and to wonder about what is new or imaginary continue to be effective. These strategies should not be supplanted by the school but augmented by teachers skilled in helping all children discover their potential.

Gordon Wells told us that knowledge cannot be transmitted in isolation, but must be reinvented as the learner brings to each new situation his own previous experience and background and interprets new information from that perspective. By the time children come to school, they are already successful communicators. They know what language is for and how to use it competently. As they experience new situations and interact with new adults and children, they continue to use language to interpret, ask questions, negotiate, comment and wonder. With skillful guidance from and the understanding of teachers, children's language continues to grow and blossom in the school environment.

"Meaning-making in conversation is a collaborative activity," Gordon Wells wrote. The wise early childhood teacher knows how to create an atmosphere in which children's experiences outside school are valued and talked about, where their ideas and comments are listened to with respect, and where they learn to reflect on what they know. Language is the key to creative thinking, solving problems and collaborative learning. The growth and development of language is a lifelong activity, an essential component of successful living.

Learning a second language

Although they may not be able to express themselves in English very well, the young ESL children you are meeting for the first time are, in fact, experienced language users. Cognitively and linguistically, they are as well-developed as their English speaking counterparts, but this development has taken place in another language and culture. Now they must begin the process of transferring what they know to a new context and continuing their development in two languages.

First, however, here are some facts about language that are important to keep in mind:

Language is a human universal. All cultural groups have a language system that their members master in order to communicate with each other.

Language is systematic. Every language has its own characteristic way of combining sounds, words and sentences.

No language is wholly regular. Exceptions to the rule are found in all languages.

All languages enable speakers to create new utterances. However, these utterances must conform to the rules established over the centuries by speakers of a particular language.

Language is both creative and functional. A speaker of any language can both create and comprehend an infinite number of utterances based on a finite number of rules. These utterances can cover a multitude of functions, such as requesting, refusing, promising, warning, denying, agreeing, disagreeing and expressing emotions.

Languages change. For example, new words can be created to meet the scientific and technological demands of the modern world.

Human beings have an innate capacity to learn language. All children, unless they are severely neurologically impaired, are capable of learning a language.

Language can be non-verbal as well as verbal. Facial expressions, gestures and other body movements may convey messages, the meanings of which are culturally specific.

Language and culture are closely related. Customs, traditions, values, stories, religion, history and other manifestations of culture are transmitted to a large extent through language.

Language and thought are closely related. Children and adults use language to share their thoughts and to expand and clarify concepts.

Although there are many similarities between the way first and second languages are acquired, there are also important differences that cannot be ignored.

Young English-speaking children do not know another language; ESL/EFL children do. They have mastered many of the skills involved in listening and talking. They know what language is and how to use it to request, demand, invite, socialize and much more.

All young children are highly motivated to learn language. Surrounded by love and attention, encouraged and complimented for all their vocal efforts, they continually make every attempt to communicate. Children learning a

second language, however, may not feel the same urgency to communicate in English as their English-speaking counterparts. They can already make themselves understood in their home language. Their initial efforts to speak English at school may be met not with praise and encouragement, but with misunderstanding and ridicule. In addition, they may hear English only at school, never at home, so that their exposure to comprehensible input is limited.

When young children attempt to use language at home, their adult caregivers try very hard to understand the meaning of their utterances and pay little attention to its form. For ESL/EFL children, the opposite is too often true. When they attempt to use English at school, the teacher often pays more attention to the form than to the message.

Young children learn their home language slowly over a number of years. There is no pressure; every advance is enthusiastically welcomed. When it becomes necessary for children to learn English to communicate at school, the atmosphere is very different. There is considerable pressure on them to learn the new language quickly. This pressure does not necessarily come from the teacher, but may originate with other children, the school system and their parents. Encouragement of children's efforts should include praise for making progress, which is often phenomenal.

Concepts and language development go hand in hand. All young children develop concepts of shape and color at an early age. Some of these ideas transfer easily into another language. Others, however, are different and can cause confusion. For example, the color spectrum is not divided the same way in all cultures. Yellow and green are separated by vocabulary into two colors in English; in some other cultures, one word describes that range of color. On the other hand, there are some notable similarities that help teachers as they plan activities. For example, the concept of round—a circle—is universal; only the vocabulary is different.

All children need to hear English modeled by both adults and their peers in a variety of situations. In both languages, there is a role for imitation. Although not all the phonemes, or sounds, of English are not found in other languages and vice versa, all children benefit from activities that highlight different combinations of sounds. For example, in the song, "Old MacDonald Had a Farm," each verse introduces a new animal sound. In English, the cow says, "A moo-moo here, and a moo-moo there." But this approximation of animal sounds is not the same in all languages. A Chinese cow, for example, says, "Woo."

All children need to play with language, try it out, test it, receive feedback and try again. This is the way children test the rules and adjust them to their own world view, a process that prevails among all language learners.

All children need to have adult language adjusted to their level of understanding and, finally, all children learn faster when language and content are combined. Language is a tool for learning.

Learning a concept is not a one-shot deal

Children need a variety of experiences with a concept in a variety of situations with a variety of people. Each new experience will result in some modification, extension or limitation of the concept.

The following are some of the clusters of concepts that young children should become familiar with over time:

Identification of objects beginning with those that are immediate and personal, such as body parts, clothing and objects in the classroom.

Classification according to color, shape, size, number, function and kind, again beginning with what is immediate, personal and concrete; comparing and contrasting these.

Spatial relationships such as near and far, in front of and behind and under and over. In every classroom, opportunities abound for both the informal and formal teaching of spatial relationships. For example, activities such as games, handicrafts and tidying up can all involve opportunities to develop children's awareness of spatial relationships.

Temporal relationships such as past, present and future, before and after, and since and during. Because time is less concrete than space, it represents an increased level of difficulty for some children. Some aspects of time, such as attitudes towards the future or the keeping of appointments, are culture-bound.

Emotional and familial relationships such as love and hate, happiness and unhappiness,

loyalty, family, kinship, self and others, including both other children and adults. Many of these concepts are culture-bound. In North America, for example, far more emphasis is placed on the individual than on the group. As another example, some cultures differentiate between an uncle on the mother's side and an uncle on the father's side. Unless teachers are aware of these differences, they may confuse the children.

Ordering which can evolve from one of the other concept clusters. For example, items that have been classified as big or little can be arranged in order from biggest to littlest, or yesterday's field trip can be reviewed in chronological sequence by talking about what the class did first, next, and so on.

Equivalency which involves recognizing that although things may differ in some respects, they may in fact be the same—or equivalent—in others. For example, different shapes may enclose the same area, or different shaped vessels may contain the same amount of liquid. Practical experience with containers of the same or different size helps develop the concept of equivalency.

Early literacy

Early literacy, a term widely used in current educational literature, describes how young children gradually become aware of the uses of written language in their environment. This ever-increasing awareness of writing and reading is now considered an integral part of children's early language development.

Before this theory emerged, researchers thought language development in the early years was only a precursor to the acquisition of the essential skills of reading, encoding and decoding. It was widely believed that the so-called readiness skills (letter recognition, recognition of the sound-symbol correspondence, etc.) that preceded the act of reading could be taught only when children were developmentally and physically ready to absorb them. This readiness, it was believed, occurred as a result of maturation after children began formal schooling and were ready to be taught the specific skills that would enable them to read.

Learning centers

In most preschool and primary settings, learning centers, sometimes called activity centers or play areas, are used as an organizational structure for the classroom. These centers provide a variety of learning experiences and materials, encouraging children to explore, experiment, discover and socialize in their individual ways. As the children do so, teachers can observe differences in learning styles as well as children's responses to stories, songs or field trips.

At first, some ESL/EFL children may be overwhelmed by the variety of new materials, the freedom to choose, which may be strange to them, and their inability to play as they would like to with other children because of a language barrier. Their responses may be quite different: some may withdraw silently, others may wander aimlessly from center to center, and still others may choose one area, such as the water table, and refuse to move. Sensitive teachers will be sympathetic to their need for time to adjust to the new environment.

The number of learning centers in a classroom varies with the needs of the children, the imagination of the teacher and the limitations of the space. They are all useful for involving children in different activities, for extending language and thinking and for encouraging social interaction with different groups.

Learning centers give teachers a chance to observe ESL/EFL children closely as they interact with others, and to make note of their linguistic, cultural and social needs. If their English is to develop so that it can keep pace with their cognitive development, teachers need to ensure that the progression is logical and continuous, that language support is visual, aural and emotional and that stimulation is appropriate and consistent.

Block center

This area, like the others, provides opportunities for learning through play. It gives teachers a chance to observe the concepts ESL/EFL children have already developed in their first language, ensure that they have an opportunity to express these concepts in English, and plan for extension.

Number, order, shape, size, space and measurement are only a few of the concepts ESL/EFL children may have already developed in their first language. Age is not always a reliable measure of what children know: observing children as you interact with them is much

more informative. For example, teachers might say things like, "This is a circle. Can you find a triangle?" "Let's put the triangle on top of the circle." "Where is the triangle? The circle?"

The possible extensions are endless, but they should be organized, not haphazard, so that ESL/EFL children are guided gradually towards expressing concepts appropriate to their stage of development. In addition to mathematical concepts, many other kinds of concepts can be introduced and extended during play in the block corner. For example, this center provides an ideal vehicle for integrating studies in various areas of the curriculum, such as science, social studies, literacy and mathematics.

Art or creating center

This area offers children the opportunity to create, experiment and respond personally to ideas and events.

The things children produce at this center provide insights into what they are thinking but cannot yet express in English. Discussing work-in-progress or completed work with the children gives teachers a chance to praise, invite appreciation from others and build children's self-confidence.

Equipment at this center will include materials such as modeling dough, cookie cutters, paints, brushes, paper, coloring pens and pencils, fabric scraps, glue, easels and tables. Signing their art work reinforces the children's concept of one of the functions of written language—labeling.

Dramatic play center

Perhaps more than any other, this center provides both children and teachers with the best opportunities for learning. As children reenact a story, role play in the house corner, choose costumes from the dress-up box or experiment with items from the prop box, they engage in many different cognitive activities: solving problems, hypothesizing, predicting and sequencing are but a few. Their dialogue with other children or a teacher helps them use language to clarify these thinking skills.

This center, popular with most children, is particularly appealing to ESL/EFL children. Here, they can become someone else, use English as another character and let their imaginations soar. Teachers watch and learn, participating only when required.

Sand or water table

The presence of one of these centers does not preclude the presence of the other. We are treating them as one, however, because the activities they encourage are similar—only the medium is different. To conserve space, some teachers set up a sand table for a month or two, then switch to a water table. Equipment at both should include utensils for measuring, pouring, scooping and digging, and toys, such as cars, trucks, bulldozers, boats, balls, animals and people. Children discover for themselves that different-shaped containers may hold the same amount, that some objects float and others do not, that sand can be molded but water can not, and so on.

Library

In some early childhood education classrooms, the library is a center, a cozy, inviting corner where books are kept on shelves within easy reach of children who want to sit quietly to look and read. When children gather for circle or story time, this corner is often used. Although the library is located in a specific area, it is so integral to all the learning activities in some classrooms that children constantly carry books to other areas to use as references.

Whatever the design, the library is important for ESL/EFL children. They need to be encouraged to look at books, choose stories for reading, listen to tapes while following along in the books and borrow books to take home. They should also be encouraged to share books from home with other children. If the books are written in another language, it is a wonderful opportunity for the other children to see and learn about a different system of writing. The illustrations, too, may be very different from those in English books.

Writing center

Like the library, the writing center, too, is portable. Reading and writing are integral to language development and must be included in the activities of every classroom every day. Very young children learn to do things like write their names on their artwork, read labels on classroom objects, manipulate the day, month and date on the calendar, choose the appropriate words to describe the weather, and recognize the month in which their birthdays occur.

ESL/EFL children should not be excluded from these activities. No matter how proficient they are in English when they enter the program, written representation should be part of their daily routine, because all four language modes—listening, speaking, writing and reading—are interrelated and develop concurrently.

Science center

The science center changes constantly to keep pace with the children's varying interests and the changing seasons of the year. Whether it is gathering colored leaves in the fall and observing what happens to them, looking at pictures of birds to help identify them when on a field trip, melting snow in winter, or planting seeds in the spring, the list of activities is endless. The purpose of the science center is to pique children's curiosity and encourage them to observe, question and draw conclusions. At this center, they learn to do things like make graphs and charts, record their observations and interpret data.

Table toys

This learning area often has a variety of toys and equipment, all of which need a flat surface for manipulation. They may include small cars and trucks, dolls or animals, puzzles and games, and scissors and paper for cutting out. Centers like this encourage the development of hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills, as well as providing a respite for ESL/EFL children who may want to play quietly on their own for a while.

Music center

The music center has a fascinating array of instruments that can be used to create different sounds and rhythms. They may be commercially created or homemade, whatever the teacher can provide—ukuleles, drums, marimbas, recorders, flutes, sticks, etc. Some centers have a record player or tape deck that may be used in large- or small-group activities.

The uses of the music center vary with every group. Sometimes, it is the focus for a singsong accompanied by a rhythm band, sometimes one or two children use it to listen quietly to a record or story on tape, or sometimes a child wants to play with one or more of the instruments, experimenting with ways of making different sounds.

Music is not usually confined to a specific area. Songs are used at transition times, at clean-up times, for group activities, and for saying good-bye. ESL/EFL children respond well to songs because it is often easier to sing something in another language than to say it.
