

Topics

- Characteristics of young learners.
- Social Constructivism and theories of learning.
- Learning styles and multiple intelligences
- Learning a second and foreign language at school.

Introduction

a. Look at the following bullet points (Harmer, 2012). Do they represent your own childhood? Do they represent **your** young learners in primary education?

Young learners

Many people think that children are better language learners than other age groups
→35. As a result, English is taught to young and very young children in many countries around the world.

- Children need a lot of good exposure if they are to acquire a language. One or two hours a week is usually not enough for successful **ACQUISITION**, though it may a) give students a taste of the new language, b) make them feel very positive about languages other than their own and c) be a lot of fun.
- Children take in information from everything around them, not just what is being taught. They learn from things they see, hear, touch and interact with. This is often just as important as more formal explanations.
- Children are usually curious about the world and like learning.
- Children often find abstract concepts (such as grammar rules) difficult to understand. However, this depends on what **DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE** they have reached. We look at developmental stages in more detail in →91.
- Many children are happy to talk about themselves, and like learning experiences which involve and relate to their own lives.
- Children are pleased to have the teacher's approval.
- Children often find it difficult to concentrate on the same thing for a long time.

Characteristics of young learners

As a starter, let's look at Pinter (2006, p. 2) and see how she sees young learners in terms of their characteristics:

Younger learners	Older learners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They have a holistic approach to language. They understand meaningful messages but cannot analyse language yet. - They have lower levels of awareness about themselves and about the process of learning. - They have limited reading and writing skills in their first language. - They have a limited knowledge about the world. - They enjoy fantasy, imagination, and movement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well established at school and comfortable with school routines. - They begin to take an interest in language as an abstract system. - Growing levels of awareness as children and as learners. - They are developing readers and writers. - Growing awareness of others and their viewpoints. - They have a growing awareness of the world around them. - They begin to show interest in real life issues.

Now, let's compare this with...

What are children like as learners?

They

- are developing quickly as individuals
- learn in a variety of ways, for example, by watching, by listening, by imitating, by doing things
- are not able to understand grammatical rules and explanations about language
- try to make sense of situations by making use of non-verbal clues
- talk in their mother tongue about what they understand and do – this helps them learn
- can generally imitate the sounds they hear quite accurately and copy the way adults speak
- are naturally curious
- love to play and use their imagination
- are comfortable with routines and enjoy repetition
- have quite a short attention span and so need variety.

(Slattery & Willis, 2001)



REFLECTIVE TASK

a. Think about your primary school days:

- What was the activity that you enjoyed the most? Why?

- What was the activity that you didn't like that much? Why?

The tasks above attempted to make you remember and contextualise young learners today and yesterday and how learning may be constructed.



REFLECTIVE TASK

- a. Think about children you know, students, or your own sons and daughters. Are developmental stages as clear-cut as Piaget suggests?

Social Constructivism and theories of learning

Vygotsky's theory of learning is based on the social construction of knowledge, that is, how families, parents, teachers and peers help children learn. His ideas are important in TEYL, but we need to understand basic concepts such as:

- **ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT**
- **SCAFFOLDING**
- **INTERMENTAL PLANE**
- **INTRAMENTAL PLANE**

When introducing sociocultural theory, Lantolf (2000; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006: 59-60) asserts that the human mind is mediated through physical and symbolic tools, such as language, which mediate the relationship between us and the objects of our experience. Since Vygotsky (Moll: 1990: 1-9) regarded education as a central sociocultural activity, he placed great emphasis on the interaction between teachers and learners. In learning activities, educators provide mediation so that learners assume little by little full control of their learning process. One example of mediation in this interaction is teacher talk, which acts as a mediator of higher mental functions in the appropriation of scientific concepts, cultural knowledge (Wells and Wells, 1992:31), and, above all, in the development of higher mental processes in two planes. One plane is intermental as well as other-regulated; it is when learners and teachers engage in the context of a meaningful cultural activity where the teacher, or expert, assists the learner, or novice, in his or her performance through modelling, demonstration, guidance, feeding back (Gallimore and Tharp, 1990: 177) and explanation so that the learner appropriates and internalises the object of study. This appropriation, eventually, occurs in the intramental and self-regulated (Lantolf and Appel, 1994: 1-32) plane of the process. For instance, in order to introduce the literary term "simile", a teacher might help learners trigger the item "comparison", and from that understanding they see the same concept through a literary term. The assistance provided in this process has been termed as scaffolding and, according to Gibbons (2002: 10), it is a special kind of help by which the teacher temporarily assists learners on how to perform different tasks so that in the future they can become autonomous and work on their own. Scaffolding can take the form of asking questions, or offering a hint to help learners develop their high mental capacities. Furthermore, teachers can direct attention to an anomaly or overlooked information. The goal remains the same,

to help learners synthesise new concepts and schemas (Goodman and Goodman, 1990:231). This assistance, needless to say, occurs in what has been called the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD is a metaphor to refer to the band (Wells and Wells, 1992: 29) between the actual stage of learner's development and his or her potential development as performance is assisted by an expert or a peer.

For more on Piaget, go to <http://www.piaget.org/links.html>

Children and their learning styles

Even though we may agree on the social construction of knowledge, we need to understand that not all children learn the same way.

This issue has given rise to the theory of multiple intelligences developed by Gardner. The following table attempts to illustrate it (Pinter, 2006:14)

Linguistic:	sensitivity to the sound, rhythm, and meaning of words and the different functions of language
Logico-mathematical:	sensitivity to and capacity to detect logical and numerical patterns, ability to handle long chains of logical reasoning
Musical:	ability to produce or appreciate pitch, rhythm, or melody and aesthetic-sounding tones, understanding of the forms of musical expressiveness
Spatial:	ability to perceive the visual/spatial world accurately, to perform transformations on those perceptions, and to recreate aspects of visual experience in the absence of relevant stimuli
Bodily-kinaesthetic:	ability to use the body skilfully for expressive as well as goal oriented purposes, ability to handle objects skilfully
Interpersonal:	ability to detect and respond appropriately to the moods, temperaments, motivations, and intentions of others
Intrapersonal:	ability to discriminate complex inner feelings and to use them to guide one's own behaviour, knowledge of one's own strengths, weaknesses, desires, and intelligences
Naturalist:	ability to recognize and classify varieties of animals, minerals, and plants

Table 1.2: Gardner's Multiple Intelligences. Adapted from L. Berk: Child Development, Allyn and Bacon 2002.

Let's see a similar classification (Spratt et al., 2005, p. 52). We'd like you to match a beginning in A with an ending in B:

a. Visual: I learn best through....		1. ...working alone.
b. Auditory: I learn best through...		2. ...hearing.
c. Kinaesthetic: I learn best through...		3. ...I'm given time to consider choices.
d. Group: I learn best through...		4. ...seeing.
e. Individual: I learn best through...		5. ...using the body.
f. Reflective: I learn best when...		6. ...I am able to respond immediately.
g. Impulsive: I learn best when...		7. ...working with others.

Answers¹



Now, can you match these activities with a learning style from the table-activity above?

1. Reading a text slowly and carefully before answering questions.
2. Playing a team running game.
3. Writing in groups.
4. Discussing how to improve pronunciation after a speaking task.
5. Listening to stories.
6. Writing new vocabulary in an exercise book.
7. Writing a composition on your own.
8. A speaking fluency activity.

Answers²



¹ a4, b2, c5, d7, e1, f3, g6.

² 1f, 2c/d, 3d, 4f, 5b, 6a/e, 7e, 8g.

Below, you can find some ideas by Svecová (2009: 8). What learning styles can you see as being exploited?

4 Drawing a song

TARGET LANGUAGE Song lyrics

CROSS-CURRICULAR LINKS Art, Music

RESOURCES A sheet of paper for each learner, (coloured) pencils, lyrics of a song written on the board or on a poster

PREPARATION Make the poster or write the lyrics on the board.

TIME GUIDE 45 minutes

Lesson

1 Prepare a poster with the song's lyrics or write the lyrics on the board before the lesson. This unit works with the lyrics of *Cockles and Mussels* as an example. You can, however, adapt the idea to any song you wish to teach.

2 Tell the learners they are going to draw pictures based on a song. Put up the poster or use the lyrics on the board. Ask the learners to listen to the song and watch the lyrics. Sing the song for the class. If you cannot sing, you can read the lyrics as a poem. Get the learners to ask about the words they do not understand and explain their meaning. Then read the whole text together.

3 Give each learner a sheet of paper. Divide the song into sections. In most songs you can use lines. For example, in *Cockles and Mussels*, each line can be used as an independent image:

*In Dublin's fair city, where the girls are so pretty
I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone
As she wheeled her wheel-barrow
Through streets broad and narrow
Crying cockles and mussels, alive, alive-O!*

Assign each line to a different learner. If you have fewer lines than learners, let them work in pairs. If you have more lines than learners, let some learners work on two images. In this case make sure that they have two sheets of paper. Tell the learners to write their lines on the paper.

4 Ask the learners to turn the sheets on the other side. Encourage them to draw a picture representing what their line is about. Tell them not to worry at all about how good their drawing is going to be.

5 Borrow a drawing from one learner. Show it to the class and ask them which line they think the picture represents. Point at the lyrics on the poster or the board and invite the learners to use them. Do not reject any suggestions. After they have guessed, turn the picture over and read which line it is.



REFLECTIVE TASK 4

- How do you like to learn in general?
- What were your favourite activity types as an English language learner?
- How did you learn something non-academic, for example, cooking?



READING TIME!

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/articles/multiple-intelligences>

<http://homeworktips.about.com/od/homeworkhelp/a/learningstyle.htm>

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/lesson-plans/learning-styles>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooqvgcY5VKU&feature=related>



REFLECTIVE TASK

- How important is our teacher talk in teaching young learners? Should we use English all the time? When could we use Spanish?
- To what extent should we modify our use of English for our learners to understand?

Learning second and foreign languages

What's the difference between acquisition and learning? Is it that easy to identify when someone has learned or acquired the present simple for example?

Summary of language acquisition vs language learning

Language acquisition is necessary for survival and development, and begins at or before birth. Babies are constantly exposed to language, with no instant pressure to produce language. Language is initially learned mostly at home from parents and others who take the time to 'get down to their level' and speak to them one-on-one.

Parents around the world eagerly await the verbal communication stage, and encourage their children to repeat and speak. Babies listen to sounds and words around them, and by the time they are two, they are usually able to say words and attempt basic sentences. Nobody teaches them grammar rules at this age - they simply repeat what they hear, and for the first few years, language production is full of errors. But as children communicate successfully, even with simple words, they are rewarded with cheers, praise, hugs and smiles. By the time children start school, they are already fluent!

Language learning on the other hand, is usually done to fulfil school requirements or to satisfy parents. The learner attends classes a few hours a week, and this environment is usually their main source of language input and output. They are taught structures and rules immediately, and are expected to produce full sentences from the beginning.

Just as they did when they acquired their first language, the language learner makes lots of mistakes with vocabulary and grammar. But this time, there is little praise for successful communication. Errors are usually punished with poor grades, and tests add pressure that make success even more difficult. For many who acquire a second or third language, the process is never completed.

Now, follow this link <http://www.videojug.com/interview/toddlers-communication>

Do you think the same theories apply to your learners?

What are the similarities and differences?

Some more input about learning languages and children:

1. Children learning their mother tongue often overgeneralise rules, i.e. say "hitted" instead of "hit", if English speakers, sometimes into their teens. (My 10-year-old son says "I brung it home from school".)
2. Even children learning their mother tongue use their own version of the language, which contains many errors, until they have internalised the systems. Interlanguage changes as it develops towards the target language.
3. Not all errors should be corrected; it depends on why/when the error was made. If the error was made because of L1 interference or lack of concentration then the teacher should point out the error to learners. But if learners are experimenting with new language / focusing on meaning or fluency, the teacher should not interrupt with corrections of accuracy. However, if meaning is not clear, the learner needs to be informed after s/he has finished speaking. With lots of exposure to correct language and high motivation, fossilisation of errors should be avoided.
4. Learners can correct certain errors themselves, once they realise they made one (see above). The teacher (or a fellow learner) may have to point this out to them.
5. Getting meaning across successfully is important and motivating – and how children acquire their mother tongue. Focus on grammar should be secondary (unless it interferes with meaning). Teachers should also be careful to build learners' confidence so they don't feel anxious about making mistakes.
6. Making developmental errors is a natural part of learning a language and shows that the learner is experimenting with new structures/vocabulary (children acquiring their mother tongue make them). Teachers should not make learners feel anxious about making mistakes.

Thus, we can say that there are different factors involved in learner errors. Look at the descriptions below and decide which factor in the box best explains the situation (see answers on the next page):

Developmental error
Mislearning
Interference
Fossilisation

This is where the learners transfer features of their mother tongue (L1) to the language they are learning (L2). For example, Italian learners tend to drop the subject of the sentence, which is perfectly acceptable in Italian, but wrong in English e.g., 'Is nice' instead of 'It's nice'.

This type of error is similar to those made by children learning their first language - where knowledge or understanding is incomplete. For example, overgeneralisation errors occur where learners learn a grammar rule and then apply it indiscriminately, e.g., using the -ed suffix for irregular past tense verbs such as 'go' and 'see' ('goed', 'seed').

Language is complex and it is quite possible to make this kind of error with new rules, forms, pronunciation, etc. Of course this kind of error also can happen with teaching - e.g. if a teacher does not present new language clearly and concisely, then it is more likely that learners will learn only partially.

This is where faulty rules and forms, etc. become permanent fixtures in learners' language use, i.e., they keep repeating the same mistake and seem unable/unwilling to learn the correct version. Failure to use third person 's' is an example of a common type of this error among many learners.

