

“The true teacher defends his pupils against his own personal influence.”

Amos Bronson Alcott (1799 – 1888)

The Young Language Learner

The speed and the way of the children’s development vary. Some children develop early, some a bit later. Some children develop gradually, others in bounds or leaps. Therefore we’ll talk about an average child. As there is a real difference between a child being 6 and another one being 9 years old, we’ll divide the years of childhood into two approximate periods: 5 to 7 year olds and 8 to 10 year olds.

5 to 7 Year Olds

These children like to tell you about what they are doing. They even can talk about the things they have done, they have heard or they are going to do. Their imagination is vivid though they sometimes don’t distinguish what is fiction and what is fact. Watching these children arguing discovers how good they are at logical reasoning. Their reasoning is bound to the fact that they believe that the world is governed by rules. The rules bring the feeling of security and stability and that’s why they should be obeyed. They are very logical from this point of view. What you say first, happens first. Let’s have a look at the situation before lunch for example. Mummy says, “Before you start eating, wash your hands, please.” It’s not surprising that the child comes to the table with its hands dirty believing that he/she has done what his/her mummy wanted him/her to do.

These children’s physical world is dominant. They understand the situations faster than the words. They understand the body language well through hands, eyes, ears. Intonation patterns which they acquire very quickly support them with important information.

Children of this age love to work or play alone but in the company of others. The feeling that what they are doing is real work makes them happy. And of course they love to be praised for what they do. Their concentration span generally doesn’t last very long.

Although they not always understand what adults are talking about they rarely ask. They don’t like to admit they don’t know something.

8 to 10 year olds

These children already differentiate between the fact and the fiction. Unlike the younger ones they ask questions all the time discovering the world. Their opinions seem to be clear and they know exactly what they like and dislike doing. They demonstrate their own world views. The physical world doesn’t lose its importance but they start relying on spoken word. They understand abstracts and symbols. They generalize and systematize. Whilst younger children were not able to decide for themselves what to learn, the older ones can make some decisions. When playing or working they are able to cooperate with others and learn from others. In these situations a well developed sense of fairness can be observed.

Eight to ten-year-olds seem to go through the gate to the adult world.

How this can be reflected in teaching

As the abstract thinking has not been developed well with young learners we as teachers should rely on senses. The more we can demonstrate with pictures, real objects, songs, rhymes the better. Words are not enough. Let’s involve movements, simple rhythmical dancing, gestures, and facial expressions. We should bear in mind what Confucius expressed ages ago: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.”

Concentration span doesn't last very long therefore the teacher must be flexible and sensitive and recognize the moment when the activity must be changed. The teacher should have lot of colourful ideas at hand to be able to plan a good lesson bringing attractive activities aimed at the language. It's not only the variety of activities, pace, organization and voice in the classroom which are important. Routines contribute to good lessons, too. Routines bring the feeling of stability and security. That's why familiar situations, activities, stories, rhymes and songs used repeatedly are very useful.

English lessons involve teaching the language as well as bringing the children up. No wonder that a good teacher chooses activities creating a friendly atmosphere of involvement and togetherness, cooperation more than a competition.

Grammar should not be the basis of our struggling. The teacher should include the barest minimum of grammar taught as grammar. Grammar is hidden in the sentences children use but it doesn't need long explanation. If any explanation is necessary, it should be as simple as possible. Children have an amazing ability to absorb language with its grammar through play and activities.

As for assessment the teacher makes regular notes of course about each child's progress. The teacher also encourages self-assessment when talking to children about their work and never forgets to highlight good points of their progress.