

How Can We Make Sure Language Acquisition Takes Place in our Classrooms?

Orele la clasele primare pot fi placute si captivante in special daca profesorii folosesc o larga varietate de activitati prin care sa se asigure ca invatarea limbii straine predate are loc. Folosirea jocurilor si a canteceilor sunt moduri amuzante de a preda, cu toate acestea trebuie sa ne asiguram ca elevii nostri nu doar repeta sau memoreaza ce se spune in clasa. Ei ar trebui sa inteleaga si sa isi insuseasca limba straina care se preda in timpul orei. Unele dintre metodele folosite cu succes sunt activitatile care implica miscarea, utilizarea de obiecte reale care ajuta la insusirea si fixarea vocabularului predat, pantomima, folosirea papusilor, a jucariilor si chiar dramatizarea unor povesti.

English classes for young learners can be enjoyable and engaging if the teachers use a large variety of activities through which they make sure that language acquisition takes place. Games, songs and chants are a fun way to learn. Yet we have to make sure that our students do not just repeat or memorize what is being said. They should also understand and acquire the language meant to be taught during the class. Some successful ways of doing this is through TPR, realia, flashcards, pantomime, puppets, and even drama.

One thing that makes working with young learners difficult is the fact that they are preliterare, meaning that they can not read or write (Schindler, 2006). Therefore it is quite hard and more challenging for the language teachers to work with them. That is why the use of TPR is essential as children learn much easier by doing. Usually textbooks for young learners offer a great variety of songs and chants that introduce the new vocabulary. Thus teachers can make use of them in combination with TPR. Besides the fact that if we use TPR we make sure that the students understand what they repeat after us or the CD player, they also use movements which imply fun and create a pleasant environment for learning.

We should use a lot TPR in our classes especially with young learners; teacher books are full of suggestions for using it. When teaching action verbs a very common game is "Simon says". When I teach parts of the body, besides "Simon says" I also use a chant I learned with my students when we were on an English camp organized by Outward Bound Romania. They enjoyed it a lot so I have been using it ever since and it goes like this: students stand in a circle and say "Hello, my name is Joe. / I work in a button factory / I have a wife and a kid and a family. / One day the boss came up to me and said: / Hey, Joe, are you busy? I said no/ Push this button with your right hand." And then it goes on with "Push the button with your left hand, leg, shoulder, back, nose" and so on. It is very funny and when I want the chant to be finished I say "Hey, Joe, are you busy? I said yes!"

Another way of making sure that language acquisition takes place in our classes is the use of realia. If we might have some doubts that TPR is not 100% efficient, then realia for sure is. Very handy with young learners is the teaching of animals so we can ask students to bring animal toys at school. Furthermore I myself have a small collection which I use in class, too. When we learn toys we can also ask our young learners to bring their favourite toy at school. Then in groups they describe it to their peers by saying what it is, its name, the colour, the size, depending on their level of English and what we want them to use. When we teach food we can ask them to bring the food that we are learning. Again in groups they are playing 'going shopping', one being the shop assistant and the others the customers. This is a very rewarding activity and every time I have done it, the students enjoyed it a lot; but we also have to take into

consideration the noise that is inevitable with such group activities and as Schindler says “we must be able to tolerate noise” (Schindler, 2006). Great examples!

Flashcards and pantomime can go together very well. With young learners I use flashcards every class, as I am not good at drawing at all. That’s good! When introducing the new vocabulary, when recycling it, when singing songs and saying chants, when playing, the use of flashcards is a must for me. Moreover, when we listen to stories we can try to bring story cards which students have to arrange in the right order after listening to the story. They enjoy it as they have a chance to stand up, come in front of the class and negotiate with their peers. As mentioned previously, the use of flashcards goes well with pantomime when we want to recycle vocabulary. In brief, students in groups draw a card and mime the word they have on it in order for their group mates to guess it. Or, as Zalta (2006) suggests, a variation of this game is the one when after reading a story, students draw a card with the name of a character. They also write some sentences about that character which they read to their colleagues who have to guess it (Zalta, 2006).

When we teach our young students we should always try to use things that they can relate to when learning. Having somebody familiar with whom they can have conversations about anything and everything is a very good way when introducing new subjects and new language to young students (Scott, W.A. & Ytreberg, 1990). I often use Chuckles, the chimp mascot present in the textbooks, with my 3rd and 4th graders. Whenever he is in class the lessons are not the same. I use him to introduce vocabulary, to start a conversation, to play games and my students are ready to talk to Chuckles. Even shy students are braver when they speak to the mascot. And in order to make the English lesson even more motivating for them I give Chuckles for one day at the end of the class to the student who was more active and more involved throughout the lesson. Sometimes it is difficult to make this choice but luckily I have four classes a week with my 3rd graders and they get to have him sometimes more than once during a semester. What is very funny for me is that when they bring the puppet back I ask them how he behaved, what they gave him to eat, what they played and they answer very seriously and they start to invent different things. Young students are very fun to be around with!

I also consider that language acquisition takes place during a lesson when we use drama. As Zalta points out very well in her article, drama motivates children, is familiar to them and helps them build confidence and skills in group dynamics. At the same time it is appropriate for different learning styles (Zalta, 2006). I notice that students are more confident when they have to interpret a role; it gives them a chance to communicate even though at this level their language knowledge is very limited. Starting from very short dialogues which they role play to longer sketches or stories they act out, young learners get very much involved and enjoy doing it very much. Therefore, if our students are laughing they are paying attention and most probably learning something thus, most likely feel pretty good about themselves (Schindler, 2006).

To conclude, all the activities listed above aim to draw our attention as teachers to the importance of using TPR, realia, flashcards, pantomime, puppets and drama in our English classes as a means of making sure that language acquisition takes place every lesson we have with young learners. Incorporating these methods into our classes will ensure that our lessons are efficient and that our students have a positive feeling towards learning a second language.

References

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