

## Psychological Peculiarities of Teaching Young Learners

Shirinqulova Sitora Muzaffar qizi

Student of SamSIFL

**Abstract:** This article deals with the most important characteristics of young learners. First, we will consider how age determines the methods we use to teach languages. Then, we will see the characteristics that distinguish young learners from older ones and the implications that these characteristics entail for English language teaching.

**Keywords:** young learners, native speakers, pronunciation, foreign languages, implications, teachers, primary school, adults

### Introduction

Before presenting the characteristics of young learners, it is worthwhile mentioning that by young learners, we mean students that are under twelve years old. Those that are over twelve are considered as teenagers. Adulthood is commonly thought of as beginning at age twenty.

### Age as a determining factor in language learning

Age is a very significant factor in language learning. The first fact that teachers should take into consideration is that young learners differ from older ones in the way they learn new languages. First, young learners learn better through play while adults are comfortable with abstract learning and are more analytical. Second, young learners get bored more easily. Generally, they lose interest after ten minutes or so. Young learners are also more egocentric and need individual attention. However, contrary to the common belief, young learners are not better than older ones in language learning. They may be better in imitating the exact pronunciation of their teachers, but they are generally less successful in learning abstract concepts. According to Lightbown and Spada, older learners are not less effective in language learning. They may have difficulty approximating native speakers' pronunciation, but they are better at reaching high levels of proficiency in second or foreign language learning[1].

What are the main characteristics of young learners?

As mentioned above young learners differ from older ones in language learning. what follows is a list of seven of the most important characteristics of young learners.

Before listing these characteristics, it is important to note that these learners are still developing. Many aspects of their cognitive capacities get better while they are growing up.

#### 1. Young learners get bored quickly.

If the activities are not interesting and engaging enough, young learners get bored easily. This is because they have a limited attention span. Generally, after ten minutes, they can get disinterested in the activity at hand, especially if it is taught directly and is devoid of the elements of play.

#### 2. Young learners are meaning-oriented

They may understand what is being said without necessarily understanding every individual word. They may not only guess and interpret what is being uttered but they also respond to it with whatever language resources they have at their disposal.

#### 3. Young learners like to discover things

They are characterized by curiosity and enthusiasm. They like to make sense of the world around them through engaging and motivating activities where they have to discover by themselves rather than being told. They also often learn indirectly from everything around them – not necessarily focusing on the topic being taught.

#### 4. They prefer concrete activities

According to Piaget's cognitive development theory, young learners are still developing. That is, they are still making their way from concrete to abstract thinking. Unlike adults who are more analytical, they are not yet well equipped to

learn abstract concepts such as grammar rules. In addition to that, they are more inclined to understand based not only on explanation but more importantly on what they hear, see and touch[2].

#### 5. They are more egocentric

They prefer to talk about themselves. Activities that focus on their lives are their cup of tea. In addition to that, children under the age of 12 need individual attention and approval from the teacher.

#### 6. They are imaginative

Young learners are imaginative. Activities that are full of imagination is a source of enjoyment for them. It is sometimes difficult for them to distinguish reality from imagination.

#### 7. They imitate

They learn by imitating adults. It is amazing how humans imitate and discover things from a very young age. Children acquire communication skills through social interactions. Consequently, because imitation functions as a learning tool, it is rewarding to use it to teach children new skills and knowledge.

#### Implications for the teacher.

The above characteristics of young learners provide useful insights for teachers. The main implications for language teaching are as follows:

- Activities shouldn't normally take more than ten minutes to complete. Asking children to make an effort to concentrate more than that is counterproductive. They will get bored and disinterested easily.
- The content should be interesting and motivating. The topics of activities should preferably focus on the students' lives.
- Praising the children's performances is of paramount importance.
- Since children try to imitate the teacher, the latter should be a good model of language use and social behaviors. The teacher's pronunciation, for instance, matters enormously.
- Children imitate it perfectly well.
- Children respond to meaning and are better at picking up the language through listening and speaking.
- Since children like playing, discovering and using their imagination, the activities that focus on making things, drawing, problem-solving (e.g. riddles), singing, playing games can be very helpful.
- The classroom should be ideally colorful and spacious enough to be able to move around without any problem.
- Children should work in groups and the activities should be taking place in stress and anxiety-free atmosphere.

Considering the problem of developing children's attention, they recommend to form a sense of responsibility, interests, discipline, positive emotions, etc[3].

The most important characteristic and condition of the student's development as a subject of educational activity, of course, is the development of his voluntary attention. However, despite the large amount of psychological literature devoted to this problem it remains insufficiently solved. Some psychologists note the low level of attention development as one of the main difficulties in teaching children at primary school.

The problem of attention is one of the oldest psychological problems. Edward B. Titchener investigated the problem of the attention and formulated the law of prior entry: «the object of attention comes to consciousness more quickly than the objects which we are not attending to»[4].

Nowadays, new educational technologies at primary school, changes in curricula and programs provoke researchers to study the impact of new learning conditions on the development of cognitive processes of students and as the result the development of the child's personality. The main properties of voluntary attention (stability and concentration, first of all) are considered basic for the formation of students' self-organization. We consider this problem very important, especially for junior schoolchildren as a subject of educational activity.

A new technology, we have created, is targeted towards development of young learners' voluntary attention in its connection with thinking at the English classes, its effectiveness has been experimentally proved[5]. We consider the following issues to be very relevant in the framework of the problems of our experimental research: the study of individual and individual-typical features of stability and concentration of voluntary attention; establishing the range of

capabilities of 6-8-year-old schoolchildren in the development of these properties; understanding the measure of teacher's awareness of the task to form students' voluntary .

Consequently, the concept of voluntary attention of junior students and its main properties: stability and concentration plays the most important role in their learning activity, more than that, the absence of purposeful pedagogical management in educational process directed towards development of 6–8-year-old students' voluntary attention may negatively influence their successful progress in English communication as well as mental development. The use of innovative programs that are not targeted towards formation of voluntary attention, as it turned out, can't have developing effect on its main properties: stability and concentration. Criterion-oriented diagnostics in the research helps to identify the actual data within these age categories, allows us to determine and characterize five different levels of development of stability and concentration of voluntary attention in comparison with the level that characterizes optimally realized age potential of this category of young learners. The techniques used in this research help determine individual actual and potential peculiarities of development of the most important 6–8-year-old students' properties of voluntary attention.

In the experimental research a large amount of factual data was obtained and systematized, having characterized individual and individual-typical peculiarities of the stability and concentration as the properties of voluntary attention in typical learning conditions, which can be taken into account when organizing psychological and pedagogical management of the learning process at primary school. Purposeful and systematic formation of primary schoolchildren's self-control actions may be realized if a teacher is aimed towards not only the development of voluntary attention, but also implements the technology of forming mental actions, applies the individual pedagogical approach in teaching young learners using diagnostic data in its dynamics and, thus, adjusts learning technology.

One of the reasons why teaching young learners requires highly skilled teachers is that these learners have difficulty understanding abstract concepts. Moreover, while teaching them, an appropriate learning atmosphere should be provided, where the children may move and interact in a stress-free environment. Young learners are, however, more imaginative. They also like discovering things, and easily respond to meaning-based activities. Finally, children are also good at imitating the teachers' language use (e.g. pronunciation) and social behaviors.

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