

ENHANCING ORACY IN THE PRE-PRIMARY ENGLISH CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Over the last decades learning English as an additional/foreign language (EFL) at an early age has spread widely in many schools. The onset age has gone down, and the number of children who start EFL learning in pre-primary education has increased dramatically. In order to put into practice the best age-appropriate methodologies in pre-primary classrooms, teachers need to be aware of the manner in which children approach language learning at an early age. The aim of this article is to highlight the importance of the aural and oral skills for EFL learning in pre-primary contexts. The paper provides information on practices that engage very young children in active EFL learning.

Key words: oracy, pre-primary education, English, age, learning context, practices.

Resumen

En las últimas décadas, aprender inglés como lengua adicional/extranjera (ILE) a una edad temprana se ha generalizado en muchas escuelas. La edad de inicio ha descendido y el número de niños que comienzan ILE en pre-escolar ha aumentado considerablemente. Para poder poner en práctica las metodologías que mejor se adapten a la edad de los alumnos de pre-escolar, los profesores deben conocer cómo los niños de corta edad abordan el aprendizaje de lenguas. El objetivo de este artículo es destacar la importancia de las destrezas auditivas y orales para el aprendizaje de ILE en contextos de Pre-escolar. El documento proporciona información sobre prácticas que involucran a los niños pequeños en un aprendizaje activo de ILE.

Palabras clave: oralidad, educación de pre-escolar, inglés, edad, contexto de aprendizaje, prácticas.

1. Introduction

It is an uncontested fact that the ability to learn more than one language is unique to humans and that everyone can learn additional languages (L2) during their lifespan. Researchers on language acquisition agree that at an early age, language learning begins by listening, by understanding the messages and by speaking (O'Grady, 2005; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Gass & Selinker, 2008; Kuhl, 2010; Cutler, 2012). To achieve this goal, children need to be exposed actively to the target language.

Even though the L2 learning processes differ from the first language acquisition process in many respects, there are close links between acquiring the mother tongue and learning a foreign language at an early age at school. Both processes have in common that the two are human language systems, and that the same implicit and subconscious mechanisms apply to the children's language learning for in both cases children 'absorb' knowledge or information from the environment (Winter & Reber, 1994). To become a proficient speaker of any mother tongue requires time (around 5 years), practice, and intensive amount of exposure to that language and these amounts increase when the objective is a foreign language (Cameron, 2001; Linse, 2005; Peregoy & Boyle, 2008; Dunn, 2012). One way to increase the amount and intensity of input necessary for implicit and subconscious EFL learning in instructed contexts is to provide enough exposure for implicit

language learning, to increase the reception and the production skills and to provide with effective practices that give young learners clues of meaning.

Following on from this view on early language learning and based on my own teaching experience in pre-primary classrooms in Spain together with a reflection on how Spanish young learners approach English in pre-school years, this paper attempts to fill in the gap in the literature. The article delves deeper into the manner in which pre-primary teachers can take hints from first language acquisition for teaching oracy in pre-primary EFL settings. After framing the topic against the backdrop of L2 learning at school, the paper will go on to suggest practices to foster the listening and speaking skills. Finally, it will expound on the main implications for practitioners and for student teachers.

2. Language learning in the pre-primary classrooms

Long before infants become language productive, they spend a long time listening and paying attention to the continuous stream of speech sounds from the speakers around them. The hearing sense develops early in humans (Saffran *et al.*, 2006), and babies have the capacity to process the speech sounds they hear much before they can understand the meaning of words (Kuhl, 2010). To process the speech sounds that make up the words, the sentences and the grammar of a language, children use the auditory learning channel (Cutler, 2012). Much in the same way, EFL learners in pre-primary classes are confronted with the speech sounds from their teachers in real time at school. As stressed by Dunn (2012: 64): “A young beginner is entirely dependent on his teacher for all English language learning in the initial stages” and the preschoolers' task is to process English by listening to the teacher and by discovering and by processing the L2 rules (Moon, 2000). In addition, despite the fact that listening in an L2 is harder than listening in the mother tongue (Cutler, 2012), listening is a fundamental skill needed to learn to speak because unless the message is clearly understood when it is heard, the learners will find difficult to process the information and store it in memory.

2.1. Starting age

Regarding the age factor, young learners are different from adult learners in their way of learning (Cameron, 2001). Children are language receptive and potentially equipped with the necessary skills that allow them to learn more than one language from birth. Cook (2002: 23) stresses that “Given the appropriate environment, two languages are as normal as two lungs”. To learn an L2 in pre-school years, young EFL learners make use of their innate language learning capacities to extract and abstract information about the language and the degree of success to achieve the goal depends on the learning context, on the amounts of input, and also, on the opportunities for language use. Despite the fact that implicit acquisition processes require massive amounts of input, the subconscious learning may not include 'intentional monitoring' of language (Gomber, 1992) because children “...bring with them an already well-established set of instincts, skills and characteristics which will help them to learn another language” (Halliwell, 1992: 3). Seen in this light, one strong argument in favour of starting EFL in pre-primary is to take advantage of the biological predisposition that children bring with them to the task of language learning.

2.2. Learning context

Despite the fact that age is an important factor for language learning, an early start does not guarantee successful outcomes in an L2 unless it is accompanied by time for learning and quality teaching. Both, the amount of input and output, and the quality of teaching play an important role in the developmental language process because they lead up to greater or lesser opportunities for aural and for oral communicative interaction (Cameron, 2001).

When infants are born, they learn how to speak their mother tongue by being fully immersed in very highly contextualized language settings; and the one and only necessary requirement to learn to talk is the presence of other human beings to interact with (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). At an early age, children learn foreign languages being exposed to them in natural infant directed conversations, it is not the case if the information is presented to them through a television or audiotape (Kuhl, 2004). Experiments carried out with infants exposed to a language over a TV set, video or audio show that the children did not achieve any language learning whatsoever (O'Grady, 2005). Children absorb a huge amount of information about language during social interaction, not only by listening to the continuous stream of speech sounds from the speakers around them, but also by looking at their gestures, their faces and to the actions (Kuhl, 2010). Regarding research on language development, studies indicate that once the language faculty has been activated for the mother tongue, it remains available indefinitely for learning additional languages.

The European Commission (2011:17) recommendations for pre-primary language learning states that "Children should be exposed to the target language in meaningful and, if possible, authentic settings, in such a way that the language is spontaneously acquired rather than consciously learnt". Thus, being immersed in the language, understanding the meaning of the messages and having opportunities for language use are necessary conditions for early L2 language learning. As highlighted by Lightbown & Spada (2006: 32): "Parents tend to respond to their children's language in terms of its meaning rather than in terms of its grammatical accuracy". Similarly, the learning context and the input data which seem appropriate for young monolingual learners is suitable for young L2 learners (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008). While naturalistic language learning contexts are characterised by constant language immersion, non-immersion settings are characterised by restricted contact time. It is not surprising that in contexts where the exposure to EFL is limited to a few hours a week, the language growth might be affected (Peregoy & Boyle, 2008).

To learn English in pre-primary setting, children need to make sense of what their teachers say. As Gass & Selinker (2008: 309) point out: "It is a given that without understanding the language, no learning can take place. Although understanding alone does not guarantee that learning will occur, it does set the scene for learning to take place". Thus, as the teacher is the main and only model available for interaction and the opportunities for language use at school are less (Cameron, 2001; Dunn, 2013), teaching English in English to children becomes an invaluable tool for it creates a rich linguistic environment and helps to foster communicative interaction and understanding. The practices suggested in this paper are based on the idea that early EFL learning in pre-primary contexts runs in parallel with content learning, with the focus on meaning and on fluency, rather than on form and on accuracy.

3. Enhancing the aural skills

The Early Years Foundation Stage Statutory Framework (2012: 7) establishes that the main early learning goals of all subject areas are listening, attention, understanding and speaking for it is precisely at this stage that the listening and speaking skills become the foundation on which literacy is built on. More precisely, the Department for Education and Skills document *Letters and Sounds* (DfES, 2007: 2) specifies that during Phase One, young children should be provided with speaking and listening activities to find easier learning to read and to write later on, because “listening underpins all language development” (Spooner & Woodcock, 2013: 4). Linse (2005: 25) stresses that the listening and the speaking skills are the foundation for reading and writing: “You need to hear a word before you can say it. You need to say a word before you can read it. You need to say a word before you can write it”. Likewise, ear-training in the EFL pre-primary classrooms has effects on the other skills. On the basis of all this, it is reasonable to think that the earlier children start developing the aural and oral communication skills in English at school, the better. In this regard, it is never too soon to start training the children's ears to actively listen to and speak in English.

At an early age, the acquisition of knowledge is learner-centered and children take an active role in the process of language learning (Cameron, 2001; Moon, 2000). There are many senses and many skills involved in the language acquisition process; thus, the activities addressed to young learners should foster the different learning channels (Linse, 2005). Not only should they aim at developing the auditory and the oral capacities, but they should also focus on developing the gross-motor control skills (arm-eye coordination; body coordination; rhythm and general movement) and the fine skills (eye-hand coordination, finger strength and dexterity). As children learn holistically, some of the activities should encourage movement, touching objects or playing instruments; others should promote body movement, miming or actions; and others, should require silence and being still.

One way to teach children to listen and to pay attention to the teacher in the EFL pre-primary class is by fostering the auditory skills with multisensory and multimodal techniques. Dunn (2013: 126) points out that “Children acquire language by taking part in activities..., so from the first lesson activities should and can take place in English”. In a communication friendly classroom, children should be fully involved in the listening process through a myriad of multisensory experiences, such as: seeing, listening, moving, touching, imitating, singing, playing, experimenting, investigating, manipulating and speaking. White and Evans (2006) stress that the good listening skills that help learners in the task of listening are closely linked to the students' holistic development: making eye-contact, no interrupting, facing the speaker, good body language, interested facial expressions, nodding, mirroring and asking and answering questions. The following practices can be embedded in all school subjects in the curriculum:

3.1. *Listening games and attention getters*

At an early age, children can be easily distracted as they have short attention span (Perry, 1995). To expand children's attention span and to help them concentrate and become more attentive in class, children can listen to sounds in and around the classroom, at school, or during school visits (e.g. the teacher in the classroom next door; children playing in the playground; wind blowing; traffic noise; ticking clock; birds singing, etc.). Then, children report orally to the teacher about the sounds. Moreover, to get children's attention and

organize their management strategies teachers can think of a rhyme, chant, song or a poem with or without actions; with or without visual aids or musical instruments (Palmer & Bayley, 2013).

3.2. *Handclapping games and body percussion.*

Children can experiment with sounds and sounds levels made with different parts of the body (clap hands, click fingers, tap knees, pop finger out of mouth, thump chest, rub hand up and down arm or leg, scratch head and slap arm or leg). Activities for phonological awareness development include activities such as discriminate the 'bits' within a word on children's names or other vocabulary words according to the number of syllables (Palmer & Bayley, 2013). Additionally, children can use their bodies to make music, they watch and listen to their teacher making a sound with a body part, and the children imitate the sound. After children have practiced with different sounds and know the dynamics of the game, one child can be chosen to be the leader. The sounds can be also made with objects (pots or plastic water bottles with peas, pasta, rice, cereals, sugar, beans, pebbles or sand); or with musical instruments (drums, triangles, tambourines).

3.3. *Games with sounds.*

Children can play games to develop the auditory awareness and the sound projection ability (growling, grunting, gargling, murmuring, mumbling, humming, and whispering); games to promote the social skills and turn taking like making animal sounds for auditory discrimination (bark, cheep, cluck, cuckoo, growl, hiss, meow, neigh, oink, purr, quack); games that involve materials development to make music together and help develop the sense of rhythm (rattles, rain sticks) (Palmer & Bayley, 2013) . The children sit in a circle, the teacher or one of the children make a sound with the mouth, imitate the sound of an animal or make a sound with an object, the next child in the circle passes the sound to the child next to him and this continues around the circle.

In this manner, by observing the presence or absence of sounds (auditory attention); by recognising the speech sounds from non-language/environmental sounds (sound discrimination); by attending to sounds (auditory awareness); by attaching meaning to sounds (sound recognition); by making sounds with parts of the body or with instruments (expressive communication skills); by singing, chanting or rhyming, children gradually learn to listen (Blarclay and Staples 2012).

4. Enhancing the oral skills

The previous headings have evidenced that teaching listening in the Early Years can support young learners during the first stages of EFL learning. In order to help children to make the best possible language progress, teachers can encourage children's talk by planning opportunities that engage them in speaking activities. One of the main teachers' aims at pre-primary level should be to ensure that the message is understood by the learners during the turn-by-turn dialogues during conversational interactions. Communicative interaction between teacher and children and input and output data can be achieved by means of a variety of techniques: asking questions, recasting, expansion, explicit corrections, elicitation, prompting, repetition and wait time (Mackey, 2012).

On the basis of the foregoing review, a selection of best practices that foster English oral language and promote the speaking skills are suggested.

4.1. Circle time

Role play, arts and crafts or indoors and outdoors play are among the best age-appropriate practices that facilitate the use of the language in pre-primary settings. However, circle time seems an ideal practice to engage children in conversations as with this age groups most of the input and output interactions take place with the whole class. Despite the fact that the sessions on the carpet are teacher-led, the learners play an active part in the interaction generated (Roskos *et al.*, 2009). Circle time is a teaching practice that can be conducted at any time of the school day, from morning rituals (greetings, register, weather, calendar, sharing and helping hands), to story time, to singing time, or to dismissal. Children can talk about daily routines on the carpet and the language linked to these actions carried out with regularity help children understand the meaning and provide them with multiple benefits (Cameron, 2003). The language that goes with the daily routines, with transitional times, and also the cognates are of great help for teachers and for learners. Children rote-learn chunks of language that go with daily routines and transitional times, and these formulas allow them become productive in English in class from day one and intrinsically help them to develop the grammar (Moon, 2000). The cognates with the same or similar spelling, pronunciation and meaning in two languages (actor, doctor, animal, hospital) are of a great help for the children to comprehend meaning and for the teachers to explain the concepts (Cameron, 2005).

During circle time sessions, child learners develop oracy, learn turn-taking and improve the organization skills such as raising their hand to speak and to ask permission. In circle time, children can listen to stories, tell stories, narrate their experiences, listen to others and acquire vocabulary; thereby, children during circle time develop their thinking and their social and oracy skills.

4.2. Musical activities.

Musical activities are fundamental to oracy since the lyrics help to train the brain to the grammatical patterns and the melodies train the ears to the sounds and intonation. Children can learn to discriminate the speech sounds, intonation patterns and rhythm of English through songs, chants, finger plays and rhymes (Bruce & Spratt, 2011). In turn, songs, chants, finger plays and rhymes, with or without movement, help to tune the young learners' ears to the speech sounds of the new language. Musical activities are easily available in EFL books, they all integrate rhythm and they all build on phonological awareness and language learning. Musical activities provide children with opportunities to listen to the sounds and intonation of language, to detect grammatical patterns and to improve their attention as well as their short-term memory and long-term auditory memory (Palmer 2013). One of the intelligences that develops first in humans is the musical one and the brain seems to remember better language and expressions learnt with music and movement (Schön *et al.*, 2008). Thus, singing and moving in the pre-primary classrooms has many advantages for child EFL learners and can be scheduled in any subject of the curriculum. Eventually, songs, rhymes and word play help to develop the young EFL young learners' phonological awareness. There is a chant, a rhyme or a song with or without movement that can be used at any time of the pre-school day, from arrivals to group time, to snack time, to dismissal. Besides, teachers can make up their own songs. First, they can decide on a language structure useful for the children at a specific time of the day. Then, on a familiar melody and some movements to go with it (Paterson & Willis, 2008).

4.3. *Storytelling.*

Stories are powerful tools to develop oracy in EFL. Listening to and telling stories are among the best practices that meet the expectations of oracy in the pre-primary classrooms. Stories can be used with different age and ability groups for developing the four skills as they contain all the ingredients necessary for language and for content learning (Wright, 2000). Children make indirect and unconscious language learning meaningful through picture books being read in class. To understand a story told by the teacher, children need to be active listeners (Roskos *et al.*, 2009). When foreign language learners are read stories in class, they get the meaning of the words from the book illustrations and through the context (Cameron, 2005). Children who are read stories in class develop the listening skills by having access to sounds, intonation, vocabulary, grammatical structures and chunks of the target language within a context. During a story time session children can develop the speaking skills by reciting, choral reading, by guessing or answering questions and at a later stage by telling stories themselves. When teachers read stories to children in pre-primary classrooms, they are offering them opportunities for holistic learning.

Circle time, musical activities and storytelling are some of the building blocks for effective oracy instruction in pre-primary EFL settings. These practices can be included in all subjects of the curriculum and implemented and adapted in the pre-primary classroom from day one according to the age and language level of the young learners.

5. Implications for teacher development

Despite the fact that starting EFL learning early has spread widely in an increasing number of instructed contexts (Rixon, 2013), publications that propose age-appropriate EFL methodologies for pre-primary classrooms are scarce. The present article has explored the skills involved during the first stages of EFL learning in pre-primary classrooms, taking into consideration how children approach languages. The practices suggested for EFL teaching are closely related to the theoretical aspects around the aural and the oral skills and entail consequences for pre-primary teachers and student teachers.

Undoubtedly, the theory and the practice on communicative interaction suggest that there are a number of aspects to be considered for successful language learning with pre-primary children. These aspects include factors affecting the language development (starting age, learning context and amounts of input); the holistic learning (auditory and oral capacities, gross-motor control skills and fine skills); the teaching techniques (asking questions, recasting, expansion, explicit correction, elicitation, repetition and wait time) and the practices that foster the aural and oral skills (observing the presence or absence of sounds, recognising the speech sounds from non-language/environmental sounds, attending to sounds, attaching meaning to sounds, making sounds with parts of the body or with instruments, singing, chanting or rhyming, music, language and movement, daily routines, transitional times, formulaic language and circle time).

In spite of the fact that knowing all the aspects around early language learning may seem a hard task for practitioners, it is worth being aware of them. In order to create a conducive EFL learning context in pre-primary classrooms, curricular planning to support the aural and oral skills should be a priority. Firstly, because successful EFL learning at an early age is built upon the listening and speaking skills; and secondly,

because encouraging the listening and speaking skills early will benefit the reading and writing skills later on, and in turn, they will facilitate the access to other learning areas of the curriculum.

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