

The Magic of Language and Children⁷

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Let's imagine that you are a baby in your crib learning your first language. You say "Maaaaaaa," and your mother responds, "No, not **Maaaaaaa**. Say, **Mother**. Repeat, **Mother**"

Of course, you look at her like she's crazy. You don't even know what the word *repeat* means. But she insists, "Come on now, say **Mother**." You stare at her a while and then go back to sucking your thumb. Who **IS** this crazy person, anyway?

Finally, your mother looks down at you with an angry expression and says, "I'm sorry. You haven't learned how to say **MOTHER** correctly. You get a '5' for the day, and I am absolutely NOT going to let you learn the word **MILK**" and she leaves the room. You sigh with relief. At least she didn't tell you to do three *planillas* with the word **MOTHER**, like she did last week.

Sounds silly? Of course it does.. Everyone knows that children learn language little by little. They make a lot of mistakes and everyone thinks it's very cute when they do. In fact, they even get rewarded with huge laughs when they make rather vulgar errors; "*Mira ese pedo*," for example, when they're talking about the neighbor's dog. And kids think it's GREAT fun to make grown-ups laugh, so they just keep on talking. And no one would EVER think about not talking to a baby just because he didn't respond correctly. In fact, parents just LOVE to babble at their newborns. "Oooooooh, isn't he a little cutsie-wootsie. *A ver mi rey, ¡házmelo ojitos! Así es. ¡Ay, qué inteligente es mi hijo!*"

So, what happens to otherwise reasonable mothers, fathers, aunts and uncles when they leave the house and turn into English teachers? What makes these same grown-ups who are so talented at playing with language and getting small children to speak **at home**, turn into cold, automatic drill sergeants who lecture little kids about verb conjugation and lead them in dry choral repetitions? Why is it that we can walk into a

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in every neighborhood in Mexico and find classrooms full of lovely and eager children, doggedly repeating over and over again these boring phrases, "*Pollito*, chicken, *gallina*, hen," and filling page after page of copybooks with the leaden sentences, "The dog is brown. The apple is red?" Where's the fun in THAT? And, who really speaks English like that, anyway?

This all sounds rather silly, but it does show us an important difference in the way babies learn their first language, and the way languages are taught in school. For example, in an infant's home, his parents and the people who care for him are not really concerned with the form of what the baby says. Their chief concern is to communicate messages that the baby will understand. For instance, no one sits around waiting for a toddler to answer, "Why are you crying? Are you hungry?" with a syntactically correct and complete response. They are perfectly content to know, "My tummy hurt."

In addition, parents don't spend much time correcting errors, and spend absolutely NO time explaining grammar rules. Can you imagine your three-year-old's insisting, "Mommy, I go pee-pee!" and your replying, "No, dear, if you're talking about the future you need to use the modal of obligation HAVE TO: I have to go pee-pee. Of course, I see you're already wet, so maybe you'd want to use the past tense, and of course, the past tense of GO is irregular, now what is it dear? That's right, WENT. Repeat the correct sentence: Mommy, I WENT pee-pee."

Another interesting aspect of the way people speak to small children is that they give them a lot of commands or instructions that children respond to with their bodies.

"Give me a kiss."

"Pick up the ball."

"¡Házme ojitos!"

It's really amazing how even very small babies quickly learn to blink their eyes and gurgle and smile, all because somebody is making noises at them. They've begun to acquire language!

Finally, most things that people say to small children hardly even require a response, just a simple yes, no, or a shake of the head.

"Do you want some more juice?"

Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

Questions, therefore, are a very important part of what youngsters hear. The fact that children haven't responded in a more sophisticated way, obviously doesn't mean they don't understand.

Sooner or later, most children begin to put together words and sentences on their own. It really is magical, and many linguists would say that children are able to accomplish this feat because of precisely these special ways the people who care for them use language.

Now, look at the difference between the way parents talk to their children and teachers speak to their children. Parents use a lot of imperatives and questions that children can respond to minimally and experiment with to build their impressions of how to speak. Teachers, on the other hand, use a lot of declaratives. "The dog is in the road." "The girl is a student." These kinds of declarative examples really don't give the student the same opportunity to acquire the language naturally; rather, it's a secret message he has to work hard at deciphering, and not a very interesting message at that!

So, the basic question is, why do we make our young students work so hard to LEARN something they could probably ACQUIRE much more easily if it were presented in a different fashion? Several linguists have already tried to answer that question, and their research shows that the best approach to second language instruction is probably one which proceeds gradually from an environment rich in opportunities to acquire the language (using reinforcement and feedback) to one which uses the student's increasing cognitive maturity to help him explicitly learn the language material (teaching vocabulary and rules.) This cognitive maturity, however, doesn't develop in children until the age of about eight or nine--about fourth grade in primary school. The smallest school children, those from pre-school to third grade, probably don't benefit from explicit teaching at all.

In short, children, especially the ones found in most of the schools like "COLEGIO BAMBI--PRE-ESCOLAR Y PRIMARIA" in Mexico, are at an age when they can truly benefit from second language acquisition techniques similar to the ones they used at home for their first language.. Here are some ways that teachers can help their small students ACQUIRE English, and not just LEARN it:

1. Forget grammar. No rules. It's a waste of breath.
2. Don't correct. Do your students speak Spanish perfectly now? Do you correct every single thing they say? Of course not.. So, let your students make mistakes in English too. Really, it's OK!
3. Forget *planillas*. Copying sentences *ad infinitum* is tedious, it's boring and it makes kids hate their English teacher. Most importantly, students could learn that same information more quickly and more enjoyably in a five-minute game.
4. Play with your children, any game, in ENGLISH. "Run over there! Jump in the air! Quick, throw me the ball!" Remember, action and instructions build language acquisition..
5. Talk to your students in English as if they were your children. "You look tired, Juan. Are you sick?" "Ooh, Rebeca, what happened to your finger? Does it hurt?" "Here, Roberto, sit here. Can you see better?" "Smile, Carmine, you look so sad!"
6. Treat your students like the small children you know and love at home. Read aloud stories and poems in English. Sing songs together and watch TV (or videos); but don't stop there. TALK about what you've seen or read. "Wasn't the Little Mermaid lucky?"

"Who do you think is more handsome, Prince Erik in the *Little Mermaid*, or the beast in *Beauty and the Beast*?"

7. DO things in English with your students that you do at home with children. Bake a cake. Plant a tree. Paint a picture. Clean up the room. Talk about what you do!
8. Finally, tell your students the nice things you tell small children at home, things that make them feel good about themselves and, therefore, about English. "You're so cute today!" "Is that a new dress?" "What a nice new pair of shoes," and most importantly, "You were a good girl today," and even "I love you!"

Learning a first language is an adventure in exploration and experimentation for a baby. It's a never-ending game that rewards the child all along the way with the very things he most wants and needs...love, food, a dry diaper and a toy. Perhaps learning a second language cannot duplicate exactly the setting of a baby in his crib saying, "MMMMMMMMMM," but it should lead the child along that same road of adventure. Learning a second language shouldn't be school work; it should be communication between a child and the people who care about him. It should be magic.