

CHALK TALKSECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING
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FUN! This word conjures up for most of us laughter, curiosity, trying something new, doing and achieving; in fact, the prize of effort, happiness. And that, for the great majority of us, is exactly what teaching is, or should be... FUN! This is why teaching English as a second language to young children is such a challenge.

In the first place, it is widely known and accepted that children up to the age of seven learn more quickly than at any other time during their lives; have a natural ability to pick up languages, especially the pronunciation; desire to please, therefore there is NO LIMIT to what can be taught, providing ample praise is lavished upon them justly and frequently.

Bearing these three points in mind, the challenge is worthwhile and rewarding to both parties, child and teacher.

There are two aspects of second language teaching: in one, the child learns a foreign language in his own country, and in the other the child is in the country where the second language is spoken. In my opinion, the same principles can be adhered to in both cases, although, usually, results are quicker in the latter for obvious reasons. However, let us take a closer look at each of these aspects.

The Child in His Own Country

It is preferable that the second language is begun as early as possible, around four years of age (or earlier, if the child is one of a large family). Songs and games are taught, observation and 'doing' material presented to him, and he is given as much oral work as possible in this new language. In this way, as a game, the child becomes accustomed to the sound and rhythm of the spoken word, and will participate freely, without the feeling of 'this is something strange'. Two years should be the maximum time devoted to the child's education in the foreign language before beginning to study his own, at the age of six, although still continuing with the other. Sometimes he is helped by his mother or father speaking the second language, but usually parents consider it essential for their child to learn another language because of the world we live in, and the opportunity it may offer in later life. Even so, a facility for languages should be apparent in the child so he can be completely successful.

The Foreign Child in the Country of the Language.

Many teachers and authorities consider that the foreign child should learn his own language first, but in my opinion, this is absolutely wrong. This child hears the second language all around him; most of his friends will be speaking it, and the radio and television will be on most of the time, so he will be accustomed to the sound and rhythm long before he goes to kindergarten. Only in his immediate family will he be listening to his mother tongue, however well or badly spoken, and educational authorities have no right to step into family affairs. It is all very well if the foreign child is of a majority group, such as a Spanish-speaking community, and is obliged to go to a bilingual Government School, but what if the child is of a minority group, such as a Polish, or French, or Italian speaking community? These languages are not taught in a bilingual programme, yet children coming from any of these groups are in the same boat. Unless one has lived in another country for some years, it is difficult to visualize the problem; however, let me put the shoe on the other foot.

Imagine you, the leader, who only speaks English, go with your family to live for an unspecified time in a town in Brazil. There is a small English-speaking community to which you immediately attach yourself. In all probability, there is a small English school run by one of the enthusiastic community members, to which most of the children go. But if there is NO English school, what then? Your children will have to go to the local school and learn to study in Portuguese the best they can. You will, no doubt, teach the rest at home, in English. Now, what happens if the local authorities consider that English-speaking children should go to the local bilingual school run by the government? You immediately send your children there, only to find that Brazilians are teaching them English and probably with many faults in pronunciation and structure with complete disregard to dialect. How do you feel? What would you do? Complain? Send them home? Perhaps, if you had the financial means to do so, but chances are you would do what the rest of the community would do; take them out of the bilingual school and put them into the local grammar school regardless of the language barrier, for the logical reason that "this is where we are living and the children are subject to the educational standards, which are in Portuguese. They can learn their own language at home."

This is the attitude most immigrants take, especially those of the minority language groups.

And the child? What about the feelings of the child? After all, he is the center of the problem. Let us imagine ourselves as a four-year-old capable of making ourselves understood in both languages and accustomed to hearing both. Suddenly, we find ourselves thrust into a class of thirty or forty children, and faced with a 'foreign' teacher who speaks our language 'strangely' who perhaps insists that what we are saying is incorrect (that is, grammatically incorrect) even though our parents have taught us differently.

After several months of this, we begin to wonder who is right, our parents or teacher, and how does the teacher know, if she has not been to 'our country?' So, conflict begins to grow, and it may not end here. Parents may take umbrage that their knowledge and usage of their own language is being disputed and corrected in the classroom, and therefore may ridicule or take out their dissatisfaction on us, the students, putting us in worse conflict within ourselves, and within our family. School is wrong! The teacher does not know! So, if school is wrong, why should we study? What are we studying for? Hence, the high-percentage of drop-outs in many bilingual schools.

But let us look again at the child, another four-year-old. He has seen words and letters on television, stores, articles, food products, names of streets. He WANTS to understand and to be like the other children around him in his adopted country. His parents send him to an all-English kindergarten where he learns to read and write and understand the books he looks at, the words he sees everywhere.

There is no conflict in this child: his mother-tongue exists naturally for him, at home. It is no problem. He feels secure in the knowledge that he is like his new friends; his parents trust his teacher, who knows. So the gate is open, wide-open, for him to lap up everything that is presented to him because there is no conflict in his little world. Learning is fun.

So it is obvious that due to outside influences, the foreign child learns faster and adapts himself to his new language and culture because of necessity; badly or well depends upon his introduction to school.

A Wider Look at Pre-School Teaching.

Children are naturally curious and eager to find out for themselves; so when material is placed before them that they can follow logically interest rarely wanes, and enthusiasm inspires them to want to learn more. This surely is the aim of every teacher confronted by inquiring minds. What is the secret? It is obvious and very, very simple. The material should be WHAT THE CHILD NEEDS, NOT what the adult or authorities consider the child OUGHT to need. There is an enormous difference.

Children are not complicated little creatures; they are simple, reasonable, logical in outlook, understanding and anxious to know, anxious to do. The problems are the adults or the authorities, who 'think' they know; who are incapable of 'seeing' from a child's point of view; who have to have masses of investigations, proven statistics, and concrete proof that a so-called new idea 'works', before they will venture to try or even give an opinion. This is a sad state of affairs. And in the meantime, who suffers? The children, and children are the same the world over, generation after generation.

So what is wrong now? Why is it so many young adolescents can neither read or write well, nor express themselves in words, are drop-outs, or labelled 'has a learning disability'? Some truly do suffer from a disability, but the majority are the results of poor school programmes; poor, inadequate or unnecessary material and a complete lack of understanding of scholastic needs in pre-school and primary by those in charge.

One thing is to theorize, behind a desk; another is to practice, in the classroom; yet another is to visualize results as a step upwards for the student.

Take a look at some of the reading material on the market today. Look at the stories: some of them are unrealistic with repeated vocabulary, and few words written per page. Look at the illustrations: most of them are either clear-cut, non-living and cold-looking or just out of this world. Look at the presentation; most of the books are beautifully presented in hard covers, colourful, but they do not inspire a child after the first few times of using them. In other words, few early readers satisfy or stimulate a child's curiosity or imagination.

At a recent educational materials exhibition in Texas, I was amazed to discover that some young, enthusiastic first grade teachers were so exasperated by the inadequate material provided for reading, that they were mimeographing their own first readers and achieving results with their students. This is highly frustrating to both parties. Surely every day should count. Every day should be an adventure; an adventure of trying, complying, listening, comprehending; a feeling of progress and achievement.

Reading and writing go hand in hand, and whatever is read and written should be spoken and understood. With this aim in mind, I feel children should be taught to read and write when they are first introduced to language but, let me hasten to add, that for me, presenting little challenges for young children to overcome, and praising them for every effort made, is my definition of 'teach' at this early age. Similarly, there are teachers who consider free-style painting and drawing desirable for free-expression, but sloshing paint on paper and scribbling haphazardly is precious time wasted. By all means allow free expression, but learned through 'guided' sloshing and scribbling!

This is why I have begun to write my own books for the teaching of reading and writing of English to young children of four years and above. My series of four books, sets out to teach the child, not only to read and write, but also to observe, comprehend, speak, and above all, to enjoy learning.*

* Christine Hudson, I Can Read and Write. Mexico City: Editorial Hamilton, 1976.

The books are in two colours only, on a cream background; different writing exercises are included, as well as detailed illustrations of all the stories, enabling children to observe and comment as well as letting them colour the pictures, once the stories have been read. Thus the book really belongs to and is the child's. He makes it different from the others by his own colouring and writing, so learning pride in achievement early.

It is so important to respect the child's individuality from the very beginning, and for each one to have a creative hand in his first reader seems to me a unique way of doing just this. My books are rather the opposite of most text books. They are smaller than most workbooks; hand-written to match the child's writing; soft-covered to make them less heavy and cumbersome to carry around; cream-coloured paper to eliminate glare and finger-marks; detailed illustrations with attractive and unattractive characters, (after all, we are not all blue-eyed, blonde and beautiful.); and lastly, the characters themselves talk respectfully to each other, for I believe that only by teaching respect will children learn respect. Nursery rhymes and a few traditional tales have been included; and drawing exercises, for comprehension practice, follow some of the stories so that the child learns to refer back and find out thus fostering the idea of 'research', now so essential in further education.

The secret is to demand. Expect the impossible from a young student, and he amazes you with his capabilities. Too often the adult asserts that "this is too difficult for so-and-so;" or, "you can't expect a child of his age to do this-and-that." Youth considers NOTHING IMPOSSIBLE, that EVERYTHING CAN be done. Cultivate this idea, and foster it in pre-school, then university standards will improve also. Not only that, but a contented and challenged student of any age is not a discipline problem, and therefore violence and unrest in schools and on campus, which are the product of frustration, will automatically disappear.

Thus, in conclusion, let me state that in my opinion:

- a) a child learning English as a second language should start young.
- b) a child living in a foreign country should DEFINITELY learn the adopted language first, in school, from all aspects.
- c) Adults and authorities should choose material and equipment, not for the sake of appearance, but for the child's needs, and from HIS point of view, making sure it is a stepping-stone towards the next phase of learning.
- d) Pre-school children should be guided, and encouraged to do and achieve as much as is possible, and as much as they want to, thus stimulating their curiosity and imagination.

A happy child is one who respects, and is respected.

There should never be a dull moment in his life, and we, as teachers, should never lose our love, hope, and enthusiasm for the enormous responsibility that rests upon our shoulders. In our students, we see the reflection of ourselves, our mannerisms, behaviour and speech.

Let us be true to a wonderful profession, but most of all, let us be true to our charges and ourselves.

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