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CHILDREN AND A SECOND LANGUAGE: LEARNING TO SPEAK

There is something rather thrilling about being able to talk to someone in another language, and that is what many English students expect to do at the end of several years of training. Speech is livelier, warmer and, in many cases, more effective than the written language. People generally relate communication to oral fluency. But, what does oral fluency mean?

To acquire oral fluency in a second language means "to express oneself intelligibly accurately and without undue hesitation" (Byrne:1976:9). It means to be able to interact with native speakers, understanding them and making ourselves understood. It is not simply to repeat some stock phrases in order to survive; it is being capable of communicating our feelings, ideas, knowledge and personality in another language, as we do in our own. This is the goal that both English teachers and students must take into consideration. The next problem that arises is how to achieve this goal.

Literature on English teaching, research on the subject, and many scholars' work have been devoted to the teaching of English to adults and teenagers. On the other hand, comparatively little attention has been paid to students under thirteen years of age. In Costa Rica, the number of children that attend English classes increases every day. These children and their parents expect the development of oral ability. They want the child to speak this new language he is learning. Therefore, why and how children learn and how they should be taught have become all important questions

for English teachers.

Many teachers complain that it is more difficult to teach a second language to children than to adults. Among the difficulties they mention is that of making grammar rules accessible to the young student. Most adults prefer grammatical explanations and can follow them fairly well, thus making the teacher's task somewhat easier. On the contrary, children get bored with long explanations and find it very hard to grasp grammatical patterns and keep them in mind. Drills and dialogues make them tired and restless. When it comes to production, it is often difficult for the teacher to get the children to speak. Frequently, visual aids themselves are of little use, especially when their role is limited to providing a context for the sentences the students have to repeat. It often happens that students are brilliant at answering drills and taking written exams, but a sense of failure overcomes the teachers when they cannot elicit spoken language from their students. "They are simply not interested", says the discouraged teacher. Whether he knows it or not, that may be the key to the problem.

Second language learning and a real purpose.

Everybody knows, or at least supposes, that when an adult joins a language course, he has good reason to do so. He may want to take a trip to a foreign country, or he may need the language for his career, or maybe he is studying just for fun. Whatever it is, he has some purpose in mind; he wants to please himself and nobody else. But, what about children? It would be a good practice if the teacher, on the very first day

of class, asked his young students (in their native language, of course) why they are taking English. He would discover many interesting things, and the most interesting would be that many children do not have a reason to study English, at least, not a reason that the children themselves consider valid.

Very few children would think that "Mother wants me to learn English" is a good enough reason for going through so much trouble. However, that is the most common answer, at least in the Costa Rican context. This is a non-English speaking country; survival and non-survival needs are more than provided for by Spanish. Few of the children in English classes have daily contact with English speakers or any perspective of an immediate trip to the United States. Television also "speaks" Spanish. Therefore, children do not see an application for what they are supposed to learn, and classes become boring and aimless.

The implications are greater than they seem. In the first place, the teacher must remember that working with children is not the same as working with adults. Children are growing human beings with very eager, very inquiring minds, more inquiring, in fact, than those of many adults. Any normal child asks questions about all the new experiences he comes across in life. He wants to put most things, including language, to a practical use. That is how he learned his native language, by applying it to situations when he needed to communicate his desires and needs. "Language, especially for children, is a rich, adaptable instrument by which intentions are made known, and it is only through purpose and meaning

in experiences that children find purpose for using language" (Urzúa:1981:2). Children develop their first language by trying to make needs known. They want food, a toy, Mamma, or being taken up in arms. As they grow up, their needs and their language become more complex. Feedback from the people around them helps children polish their language. Most of them speak very well before they learn to read and write. Experience has taught them that language is a tool, and they apply this same concept to second-language learning.

Most teachers give great importance to English grammar, and so they are disappointed when children do not learn it quickly. What happens is that children are more interested in the meaning than in the form of sentences (Ibid.). They do not know what a noun and a verb are in Spanish, so they cannot be expected to know that in another language. They are interested in just one thing: "How can I say this in English?" The forms of grammar make little sense to them except when viewed as instruments to attain their goal: communication.

The teacher should not think his students lazy or stupid when they do not seem to learn anything. If he does not realize that children have a lot to say and would be willing to say it if given the chance, he might as well close his classroom and turn to dog-training. I discovered this while teaching vocabulary to a beginning class of children between nine and twelve. In several sessions, they learned vocabulary for pets, dogs, and professions. First we used picture cards, and then we sat in a circle and began to discuss some questions such as "Do you have a pet?" "What is his name?" and "Tell us about

your favorite toy". The results were incredible. They were eager to use their limited English to talk about these things that formed part of their real, everyday life, and they were anxious to share their experiences with others.

Children, it is evident, have a strong need for self-expression. They like to talk about themselves (and who does not?), and about the things they know. A nice type of exercise for practicing the future tense and some vocabulary is to make the students talk about what they are going to be when they grow up. In this way, they also satisfy their desire to communicate their personality, intuition, emotional aspirations" (Urzúa:1981:3). They may also acquire the necessary forms to express other needs, such as asking for directions, requesting permission to leave the class, or telling the teacher what happened during recess. Once children realize that they can use the second language to put their own world into words and communicate with their classmates and teacher, learning becomes fun. And that is the way it should be.

This does not mean that the teacher must allow the children to talk at random, mixing everything and spoiling communication. Especially at the beginning levels, there must be some control over the structures they are using. The teacher's task is to help the children to use the structures they know according to what they wish to say. Children do not require long explanations to use grammatical patterns successfully or even to be creative with them. Two small boys in my class found out that the verb "to be" was very useful for insulting people, when combined with the appro-

priate vocabulary. Each of them wrote a list of things he wanted to say against the other, and then both performed an exciting political debate for the rest of the class. That was completely spontaneous on their part, ...not very polite, maybe, but they were having fun using the language for some definite purpose of their own. And they did not need complex structures to express themselves. Children do not want to deliver complicated speeches. They are direct, concise, and simple when using their first language; that is how they want to use the second language.

Activities: Once the teacher has helped his students to find a reason for learning and speaking another language, he must also provide opportunities for them to do it in a variety of situations. Visual aids, and model dialogues may provide the starting point for children to develop their own original conversations. They also enjoy playing games, taking role, and learning songs. The teacher should not be surprised to discover that they try to permeate their activities with their own experience and keep bringing their pets and their parents into their oral production. As soon as the students discover they can communicate a little in another language, they grow bolder in the meanings they want to express. In this way, they prepare themselves for learning more complex functions and structures of the target language.

Conclusion

Being a second language teacher can be the most rewarding and most frustrating experience of all, especially when children are concerned. The hardest part of the process is to make them see a purpose for learning and speaking English, casting aside shyness and lack of interest. The teacher must know his students with their different personalities and needs, which should be respected, but exploited for the language learning process. Far from being an obstacle, a child's definite personality can be the greatest help in his learning. The teacher must explore it and discover his interests to encourage the child to learn and speak the target language.

Children use language for interaction with others. Language is not an end in itself, but an instrument that allows its possessor to defend himself in life, to achieve his goals, to relate to other people. For the young students, it is very important to see a personal reason for using the target language. The reason may be to give others a glimpse into the speaker's world, to learn about other people, or to share knowledge. Children talk about their toys, their families and their friends. They also have ideas and dreams they want to talk about, but they may be afraid to do so in a second language.

It is the teacher's task to help them overcome their fears and see this new language only as a new tool they may use. Children learn progressively, according to what they need or want to say. If the teacher provides them with the opportunity to express themselves, with meaningful

materials and through meaningful activities, they will respond to his effort. Visual aids, dialogues, vocabulary items, and whatever material the teacher brings into the class, must not be alien to the children but familiar to their own experience. In this way, they will understand that the target language works as a real, useful communicative instrument in a real world with real people in it.

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