

Inspiration of Family-Based Immersion Model of Language Acquisition for English Teaching for Young Learners

Liu Juan

*International Education College, Wuchang Institute of Technology, Wuhan, China
liruyue_19832003@163.com*

Abstract: *The trend that an increasing number of young learners start to learn English at a very early age facilitates the diversity of language teaching methods. However, influenced by traditional language learning method, some teachers still focus on language form, not giving full attention to learners' communicative ability. As a result, younger learners keep using pattern drill to practice speaking without sufficient listening as input, which is opposite to the "acquisition" principle and partly explains why young learners fail to learn English as expected. According to the theory of second language acquisition, listening and speaking should come before reading and writing. This is a natural process of acquiring a language. Meanwhile, younger learners are special for they are highly motivated by interest and their attention span is limited. Therefore, language learning for younger learners is supposed to be interesting, practical, and close to their daily life. In accordance with this need, some families adopt the immersion method to help their younger learners acquire the language naturally in daily communication. Since language learning in the classroom shares a common goal with it, this essay is to explore how the immersion method of language acquisition in the family could be used in classroom teaching; what kind of activities can be conducted for that purpose. More inspiration is expected for English teachers to improve their teaching efficiency in the sense that learners can communicate with what they acquired in the class.*

Keywords: *Language Acquisition, Family-Based Immersion Method, Language Learning in the Classroom, Classroom Activities*

1. Introduction to Immersion Model of Learning a Second Language

Among all the teaching methods available, the one which draws increasing attention is immersion-based learning. Originated in Canada, this immersion mode is consistent with the basic principles of second language acquisition, with the focus on learning a language in the most authentic and natural way. In this sense, language serves as both the content to be learned and the tool through which all teaching activities are conducted. Learners are not learning a language for its own sake, but acquiring a language while using it unconsciously.

Since learners are not living in an English-speaking country, the most authentic way for them to learn English is that language teachers provide them with the language environment as best can. How to get learners immersed is a great challenge for teachers, as this mode involves a lot of factors and can be applied in various ways. Before applying this method, language teachers should bear in mind the level of learners' cognitive and psychological development to ensure the course design is appropriate and feasible. Advantageous as it is, it is also demanding for teachers of young learners.

2. The Application of Immersion Model of Language Learning in Family

Parents are those who know their children quite well. Equipped with language knowledge, they are the ideal language teachers and facilitators for their children's learning. The special "teachers" can interact with their "learners" through daily communication. That's how family-based immersion modal of language learning becomes possible and practical. This is a natural process of acquisition with listening and speaking being dominant in their early stage of learning. Based on the intimate relationship, young learners can make progress not only in language acquisition, but in psychological and cognitive development.

This advantage also witnesses the emergence and gradual popularity of new language training programs. Program like “Mommy English” targets at mothers, most of whom are the first teachers of young learners. Properly guided, they may exert great influence on young learners in every aspect during the process of language acquisition. Through these programs, mothers are trained in language learning through real-life conversation so that they can imitate what they experienced in their own home. In this way, the possible authentic language environment is simulated, in which children’s language is accumulated and their knowledge about subjects is also acquired. Moreover, mothers also set themselves as examples of successful language learners which is great encouragement for their children. This explains why programs of this kind occupy most of the language training market.

3. Problems about Language Teaching in Preschool

Nowadays, children begin to learn English as early as their preschool life starts. This sets higher requirements for teachers of preschoolers. However, problems exist about language teaching in preschool. For various reasons, some teachers lack professional knowledge about language itself while others focus on pattern drill and memorization ignoring its practical use, either of which will put young learners into dilemma and have negative influence on their future learning. The benefits and advantages that language learning in early stage could bring can be prominent only when learners are learning by using it. This is the combined result of systematic knowledge of language and appropriate teaching activities. The increasing need of preschool English teachers foresees promising future for students majoring in preschool education especially for those who show advantages in language. But this urgent need poses great challenge for them in the meanwhile with higher standard of recruitment.

4. Inspirations of Family-Based Immersion Method for English Teaching for Young Learners in the Class

Relatively new, preschool education is a major which aims at training qualified preschool teachers to correspond to establishment of more preschools for increasing number of children. In order to satisfy the need of early language acquisition, preschool teachers are supposed to be proficient in English and related knowledge (Yang Wen, 2008).

As an English teacher and a mother of 3-year-old boy, the writer tries to explore whether students of preschool education could be trained in the class in the same way as the language training programs did to their “mother students”, so that the immersion model can be applied in their later teaching successfully.

For the course, English teaching for children, the writer conducted a series of classroom activities including topic-based course design, sample presentation, demo class for peer review, etc. Through these activities, students are gradually conscious of the application of the immersion model in a certain manner.

4.1 Academic preparation before immersion

Before getting young learners immersed in the English environment, teachers should be clear about characteristics of young learners as well as their cognitive development to guarantee the corresponding activities are effective and helpful.

Young learners are energetic but have short attention span; they are active and willing to participate but get bored easily; they are curious and receptive to new ideas; they are imaginative but prefer concrete objects over abstract concepts; they are social and like to imitate. All these features will decide the organization of the class for learners’ better immersion.

Jean Piaget, a Swiss Psychologist, who was the first person to make systematic study of the cognitive development in children, put forward theory of cognitive development guiding educators to think deeply about their teaching. This theory identifies four stages: sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage, each corresponding to a certain age group and indicating features of learners of each group respectively. With these stages in mind, preschool teachers could better arrange their class with appropriate activities and realia, etc.

4.2 Class organization for better immersion

4.2.1 Setting learning objectives

For learners of younger age, teachers should be more cautious in setting learning objectives. It is not feasible for younger learners to reach many goals during a short period of time. Objectives should also have focus (Yang Wen, 2008). The amount of language used to serve as the communication tool should also be stated in details, indicating the main vocabulary to be learned for a lesson.

When preparing a lesson, teachers should first consider the age of their students and their class size. This will set a limit to the time spent on new knowledge and revision respectively. The activities available are also related to this.

4.2.2 Teaching procedure

The objectives are mainly reached through various classroom activities. During this process, teachers should take a lot of factors into consideration.

Story-telling and role-play are commonly used activities to teach subject like math, develop common sense, and create language environment. They can be designed for different levels of learners. For learners who just start their preschool and have no language foundation, teachers should be cautious about the proportion of English and the mother tongue used in the whole procedure; while for learners of higher grades, original stories can be redesigned for better use. For example, teachers start the story and guide learners to work together to finish the story in their own way (Yang Wen, 2008). Familiar games in daily life can also be adapted in the class. One advantage of doing this is that if learners cannot fully understand how the game is organized in English, they can gradually know it while doing it since it is like what they have done in their daily life.

At this level, the communicative function is emphasized. The basic principle for this part is one function at a time. The unit for language input is another concern in this process. For learners of lower grades, teachers would use the two languages interchangeably (Yang Wen, 2008). At this stage, the language unit is meaningful phrase. For learners of higher grades, teachers could input simple sentences (Wen Qiufang, 2019). No matter which unit is taken in, it is not advisable for teachers to explain the target language using mother tongue. Possible solution could be explaining the new language through pictures, body language, facial expression, and proper realia.

When teachers create language environment through classroom activities, what is still worth mentioning is the way how the language focus is repeated. The language focusses that teachers want their learners to master must be consolidated in different means in the whole teaching process. But repetition in English learning for preschoolers cannot be easy and can be very skillful. Young learners will lose interest when the same sentence is spoken repeatedly. The key vocabulary, phrase or sentence helping them to realize the communicative function can appear in different stages of a certain activity. It can be spoken directly for the first time in the lead-in activity, reappear through question and answer, or word-guessing, etc.

As for occasional mistakes, teachers should not correct mistakes every time they occur (Rod Ellis, 2000). Although young learners are active and willing to imitate, they still feel frustrated when they are corrected all the way. According to Chomsky, "language is the result of the speaker's psychological activity. Young learners are born to have the ability to learn a language. It is not necessary to correct the language errors. They can do self-correction through life practice as they grow up." The proper way for teachers to correct mistakes that will lead to misunderstanding is that teachers could express the meaning again in the right way as example.

4.2.3 Revision for consolidation

Time allocation for a lesson is rather crucial, for the amount of new information to be imparted is limited and preschoolers also need more time for revision (Yang Wen, 2008). After the main procedure comes to an end, teachers must lead students to revise what has been learned. Simple repetition could never be the first choice to do so. Therefore, the useful way for consolidation is through context-based question and answer or role-play. Since students experienced the whole teaching procedure and know what they are expected to know, using the similar context to review is helpful for them to better master the content; meanwhile, this context is also part of language environment for them to realize the goal of learning by using.

5. Conclusion

Language teaching for young learners is a complicated process. Learners are not fully developed in many aspects bringing many unpredicted factors into classroom teaching. But this is also an opportunity for teachers to make their class more flexible so that the language teaching would become as authentic as possible. The whole class starting from setting objective through conducting various activities to final revision can be a different version of family education, while teachers can be professional “parents”. If the intimate relationship between parents and children could also be established in the class, classroom could be another family provide one more opportunity for preschoolers to keep in touch with the language. In this way, language input is sufficient and constant, and previous problems like insufficient practice and inappropriate methods could be solved finally.

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