

## TEACHING ACROSS AGE LEVELS

**OBJECTIVES** After reading this chapter, you will be able to:

- appreciate the importance of age as a factor in designing lessons and courses
- understand the characteristics of children's learning that must be incorporated into lessons and courses
- distinguish differences between adults and children and how to accommodate such differences in your methodology
- recognize the characteristics of students "in between" childhood and adulthood, and provide tasks and activities that are appealing and challenging to teenagers

On occasion people who are quite unaware of the language-teaching field will walk into my office at the university looking for reassurance. They'll ask me, "Since English is my native language, I won't have any problem teaching it, will I?" Or they might ask, on the eve of their departure for Japan (without the slightest clue of who their future students will be), "Can you recommend a good textbook for my students?" Other naive inquirers who have had a little exposure to the vastness and complexity of the field still might assert, "I would like to learn how to teach ESL. Can you recommend a good workshop?" Such questions are prompted by advertisements in local newspapers that promise lifelong employment as an English teacher (in exotic places) if only you'll attend someone's weekend seminar (or two) and, of course, cough up a fairly hefty enrollment fee.

You are already aware of the array of questions, issues, approaches, and techniques that must be included in any training as a language teacher—a complexity that cannot be covered effectively in a weekend workshop. Part of this complexity is brought on by the multiplicity of contexts in which languages, and English more so than any other language, are learned and taught. Even if you could pack a suitcase full of the most current teaching resources, you would still have to face the question of *who* your learners are, *where* they are learning, and *why* they are learning.

This chapter begins to deal with contextual considerations in language teaching by addressing the learner variable of age. Chapter 7 then deals with the learner variable of language proficiency (beginning, intermediate, and advanced). And Chapter 8 grapples with several complex variables introduced by sociopolitical contexts of teaching (country, societal expectations, cultural factors, political constraints, the status of English); by the institution one is teaching in (school,

university, language school, adult education, vocational/workplace courses); and by the implied purposes for learning English (academic, technical, social, cultural immersion, enrichment, survival). Your choices of techniques, lesson organization, and supporting materials must take all of these considerations into account.

## TEACHING CHILDREN

Popular tradition would have you believe that children are effortless second language learners and far superior to adults in their eventual success. On both counts, some qualifications are in order.

First, children's widespread success in acquiring second languages belies a tremendous subconscious *effort* devoted to the task. As you have discovered in other reading (see *PLLT*, Chapters 2 and 3, for example), children exercise a good deal of both cognitive and affective effort in order to internalize both native and second languages. The difference between children and adults (that is, persons beyond the age of puberty) lies primarily in the contrast between the child's spontaneous, **peripheral** attention to language **forms** and the adult's overt, **focal** awareness of and attention to those forms. Therefore, the popular notion about children holds only if "effort" refers, rather narrowly, to focal attention (sometimes thought of as "conscious" attention—see *PLLT*, Chapter 10) to language forms.

Second, adults are not necessarily less successful in their efforts. Studies have shown that adults, in fact, can be superior in a number of aspects of acquisition (*PLLT*, Chapter 3). They can learn and retain a larger vocabulary. They can utilize various deductive and abstract processes to shortcut the learning of grammatical and other linguistic concepts. And, in classroom learning, their superior intellect usually helps them to learn faster than a child. So, while children's fluency and naturalness are often the envy of adults struggling with second languages, the context of classroom instruction may introduce some difficulties to children learning a second language.

Third, the popular claim fails to differentiate very young children (say, 4- to 6-year-olds) from pubescent children (12 to 13) and the whole range of ages in between. There are actually many instances of 6- to 12-year-old children manifesting significant difficulty in acquiring a second language for a multitude of reasons. Ranking high on that list of reasons are a number of complex personal, social, cultural, and political factors at play in elementary school education.

Teaching ESL to school-age children, therefore, is not merely a matter of setting them loose on a plethora of authentic language tasks in the classroom. In fact, for some TESOL professionals (Cameron, 2003), the challenges of teaching children warrants a separate acronym: TEYL (teaching English to young learners). Teacher reference books are devoted solely to the issues, principles, and methodology surrounding the teaching of children (Linse, 2005; Moon, 2000; Pinter, 2006; Reilly & Ward, 1997). To successfully teach children a second language requires specific

skills and intuitions that differ from those appropriate for adult teaching. Five categories may help give some practical approaches to teaching children.

### 1. Intellectual development

An elementary school teacher asked her students to take a piece of paper and pencil and write something. A boy raised his hand and said, "Teacher, I ain't got no pencil." The teacher, somewhat perturbed by his grammar, embarked on a barrage of corrective patterns: "I *don't* have a pencil. You *don't* have a pencil. We *don't* have pencils." Confused and bewildered, the child responded, "Ain't nobody got no pencils?"

Since children (up to the age of about 11) are still in an intellectual stage of what Piaget (1972) called "concrete operations," we need to remember their limitations. Rules, explanations, and other even slightly abstract talk about language must be approached with extreme caution. Children are centered on the here and now, on the functional purposes of language. They have little appreciation for our adult notions of "correctness," and they certainly cannot grasp the metalanguage we use to describe and explain linguistic concepts. Here are some rules of thumb for the classroom:

- Don't explain *grammar* using terms like "present progressive" or "relative clause."
- *Rules* stated in abstract terms ("To make a statement into a question, you add a *do* or *does*") should be avoided.
- Some grammatical concepts, especially at the upper levels of childhood, can be called to learners' attention by showing them certain *patterns* ("Notice the *ing* at the end of the word") and *examples* ("This is the way we say it when it's happening right now: I'm walking to the door").
- Certain more difficult concepts or patterns require more *repetition* than adults need. For example, repeating certain patterns (without boring students) may be necessary to get the brain and the ear to cooperate. Unlike the boy who had no pencil, children must understand the meaning and relevance of repetitions.

### 2. Attention span

One of the salient differences between adults and children is attention span. First, it is important to understand what attention span means. Put children in front of a TV showing a favorite cartoon and they will stay riveted for the duration. So, you cannot make a sweeping claim that children have short attention spans! But short attention spans do come into play when children have to deal with material that to them is boring, useless, or too difficult. Since language lessons can at times be difficult for children, your job is to make them interesting, lively, and fun. How do you do that?

- Because children are focused on the *here and now*, activities should be designed to capture their immediate interest.
- A lesson needs a *variety* of activities to keep interest and attention alive.
- A teacher needs to be *animated*, lively, and enthusiastic about the subject matter. Consider the classroom a stage on which you are the lead actor; your energy will be infectious. While you may think that you're overdoing it, children need this exaggeration to keep spirits buoyed and minds alert.
- A *sense of humor* will go a long way in keeping children laughing and learning. Since children's humor is quite different from adults', remember to put yourself in their shoes.
- Children have a lot of natural *curiosity*. Make sure you tap into that curiosity whenever possible, and you will thereby help to maintain attention and focus.

### 3. Sensory input

Children need to have all five senses stimulated. Your activities should strive to go well beyond the visual and auditory modes that we feel are usually sufficient for a classroom.

- Pepper your lessons with *physical* activity, such as having students act out things (role-play), play games, or do Total Physical Response activities.
- Projects and other *hands-on activities* go a long way toward helping children to internalize language. Small-group science projects, for example, are excellent ways to get them to learn words and structures and to practice meaningful language.
- *Sensory aids* help children to internalize concepts. The smell of flowers, the touch of plants and fruits, the taste of foods, liberal doses of audiovisual aids like videos, pictures, tapes, music—all are important elements in children's language teaching.
- Remember that your own *nonverbal language* is important because children will indeed attend very sensitively to your facial features, gestures, and body language.

### 4. Affective factors

A common myth is that children are relatively unaffected by the inhibitions that adults find to be a block to learning. Not so! Children are often innovative in language forms but still have a great many inhibitions. They are extremely sensitive, especially to peers: What do others think of me? What will so-and-so think when I speak in English? Children are in many ways much more fragile than adults. Their egos are still being shaped, and therefore the slightest nuances of communication can be negatively interpreted. Teachers need to help them to overcome such potential barriers to learning.

- Help your students to laugh *with* each other at various mistakes that they all make.
- Be patient and supportive to build self-esteem, yet at the same time be firm in your expectations of students.
- Elicit as much oral participation as possible from students, especially the quieter ones, to give them plenty of opportunities for trying things out.

### 5. Authentic, meaningful language

Children are focused on what this new language can actually be used for here and now. They are less willing to put up with language that doesn't hold immediate rewards for them. Your classes can ill afford to have an overload of language that is neither authentic nor meaningful.

- Children are good at sensing language that is not *authentic*; therefore, "canned" or stilted language will likely be rejected.
- Language needs to be firmly *context embedded*. Story lines, familiar situations and characters, real-life conversations, meaningful purposes in using language—these will establish a context within which language can be received and sent and thereby improve attention and retention. *Context-reduced* language in abstract, isolated, unconnected sentences will be much less readily tolerated by children's minds.
- A *whole language* approach is essential. If language is broken into too many bits and pieces, students won't see the relationship to the whole. And stress the interrelationships among the various skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), or they won't see important connections.

It takes a very special person to be able to teach children effectively. Along with all these guidelines, an elementary school teacher develops a certain intuition with increasing months and years of experience. If you don't yet have the experience, you will in due course of time. Meanwhile, you must begin somewhere, and these rules of thumb will help.

## TEACHING ADULTS

Although many of the "rules" for teaching children can apply in some ways to teaching adults, the latter age group poses some different, special considerations for the classroom teacher. Adults have superior cognitive abilities that can render them more successful in certain classroom endeavors. Their need for sensory input can rely a little more on their imaginations (they can be told to "imagine" smelling a rose versus actually smelling one). Their level of shyness can be equal to or greater than that of children, but adults usually have acquired a self-confidence not found in children. And, because of adults' cognitive abilities, they can at least occasionally deal with language that isn't embedded in a "here and now" context.

So, as you consider the five variables that apply to children, keep in mind some specific suggestions and caveats.

1. Adults are more able to handle abstract rules and concepts. But beware! As you know, too much abstract generalization about usage and not enough real-life language use can be deadly for adults, too.
2. Adults have longer attention spans for material that may not be intrinsically interesting to them. But again, the rule of keeping your activities short and sweet applies also to adult-age teaching.
3. Sensory input need not always be as varied with adults, but one of the secrets of lively adult classes is their appeal to multiple senses.
4. Adults often bring a modicum of general self-confidence (global self-esteem) into a classroom. With children you must compensate for their fragile egos; such compensation may not be as critical with adults. Yet we should never underestimate the emotional factors that may be attendant to adult second language learning.
5. Adults, with their more developed abstract thinking ability, are better able to understand a context-reduced segment of language. Authenticity and meaningfulness are of course still highly important, but in adult language teaching, a teacher can take temporary digressions to dissect and examine isolated linguistic properties as long as students are returned to the original context.

Some implications for general classroom management (see Chapter 13 for a full treatment) can be drawn from what we know about differences between children and adults. Some management “do’s” and “don’ts”:

1. *Do* remember that even though adults cannot express complex thinking in the new language, they are nevertheless intelligent grown-ups with mature cognition and fully developed emotions. Show respect for the deeper thoughts and feelings that may be “trapped” for the moment by a low proficiency level.
2. *Don’t* treat adults in your class like children by
  - a. calling them “kids,”
  - b. using “caretaker” talk (the way parents talk to children), or
  - c. talking down to them.
3. *Do* give your students as many opportunities as possible to make *choices* (cooperative learning) about what they will do in and out of the classroom. That way, they can more effectively make an investment in their own learning process.
4. *Don’t* discipline adults in the same way you would children. If discipline problems occur (showing disrespect, laughing, disrupting class, etc.), first assume that your students are adults who can be reasoned with like adults.

## TEACHING TEENS

It is of course much too absolute to consider that a child ceases to be a child at the age of puberty and that all of the rules of adult teaching suddenly apply! It is therefore appropriate to consider briefly the sort of variables that apply in the teaching of "young adults," "teens," and high school-age children whose ages range between 12 and 18 or so.

The "terrible teens" are an age of transition, confusion, self-consciousness, growth, and changing bodies and minds. What a challenge for the teacher! Teens are in between childhood and adulthood, and therefore a very special set of considerations applies to teaching them. Perhaps because of the enigma of teaching teenagers, little is specifically said in the language-teaching field about teaching at this level. Nevertheless, some thoughts are worth verbalizing, even if in the form of simple reminders.

1. Intellectual capacity adds abstract operational thought around the age of 12. Therefore, some sophisticated intellectual processing is increasingly possible. Complex problems can be solved with logical thinking. This means that linguistic metalanguage can now, theoretically, have some impact. But the success of any intellectual endeavor will be a factor of the attention a learner places on the task; therefore, if a learner is attending to self, to appearance, to being accepted, to sexual thoughts, to a weekend party, to whatever, the intellectual task at hand may suffer.
2. Attention spans are lengthening as a result of intellectual maturation, but once again, with many diversions present in a teenager's life, those potential attention spans can easily be shortened.
3. Varieties of sensory input are still important, but again, increasing capacities for abstraction lessen the essential nature of appealing to all five senses.
4. Factors surrounding ego, self-image, and self-esteem are at their pinnacle. Teens are ultrasensitive to how others perceive their changing physical and emotional selves along with their mental capabilities. One of the most important concerns of the secondary school teacher is to keep self-esteem high by
  - avoiding embarrassment of students at all costs,
  - affirming each person's talents and strengths,
  - allowing mistakes and other errors to be accepted,
  - de-emphasizing competition between classmates, and
  - encouraging small-group work where risks can be taken more easily by a teen.
5. Secondary school students are of course becoming increasingly adultlike in their ability to make those occasional diversions from the "here and now" nature of immediate communicative contexts to dwell on a grammar point or

vocabulary item. But as in teaching adults, care must be taken not to insult them with stilted language or to bore them with overanalysis.



This chapter is intended to offer a number of factors for you to consider as you attend to the age of your learners. These factors were noted as a series of pointers and reminders rather than as anecdotal or observational references to classrooms full of students. You can make those references yourself as you observe and as you begin to teach. The next time you're in an ESL classroom, notice how someone you're observing (or how you yourself) accounted for age variables in the overall lesson, in the type of techniques that were used, in the management of the classroom, in verbal registers as well as body language, in the teacher-student exchanges, and in the relationship that those exchanges conveyed. And remember that in some "adult" classes, students in their teens may be sitting next to classmates in their sixties, representing two or more generations! You may actually surprise yourself by how much of what we do and say as teachers is a factor of students' age.