

TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Introduction

- ◆ Nowadays it is very popular to pay great attention to the comprehensive development of children. There is no definite answer to the question of what age it is necessary to begin the development of a child. Some scientists believe that the earlier knowledge is invested in a child, the better and easier it will be for him to continue learning. Others advocate for a full-fledged living of the child's childhood period without imposing unnecessary information on adults.

Definition of Young Learners

- ◆ According to the education system in Libya, 'young learners' are those who are studying in basic education between six and fifteen, while some teachers think that young learners are only those aged twelve and below. From the literature review, there is some controversy on specifying the exact age of a 'young learner'. For example, Rixon (1999) and Phillips (1993) defined young learners as those aged between five and twelve years old. Scott & Ytreberg (2001) have their own classification in which they divided young learners into two main groups, five to seven olds, and eight to ten year olds. They added that each group has its own abilities in doing things and recognizing the world around them.

- ◆ Cameron (2001) claimed that “young children may learn a foreign language especially effectively before puberty because their brains are still able to use the mechanisms that assisted first language acquisition” during what is known as ‘the critical period hypothesis’.

- ◆ Nasef, 2004 investigated the difficulties encountered by some Libyan university students in acquiring English speaking skills, and found that students who were taught by the Audio Lingual Approach very often fail to use different patterns of dialogues they have already mastered in different situations.

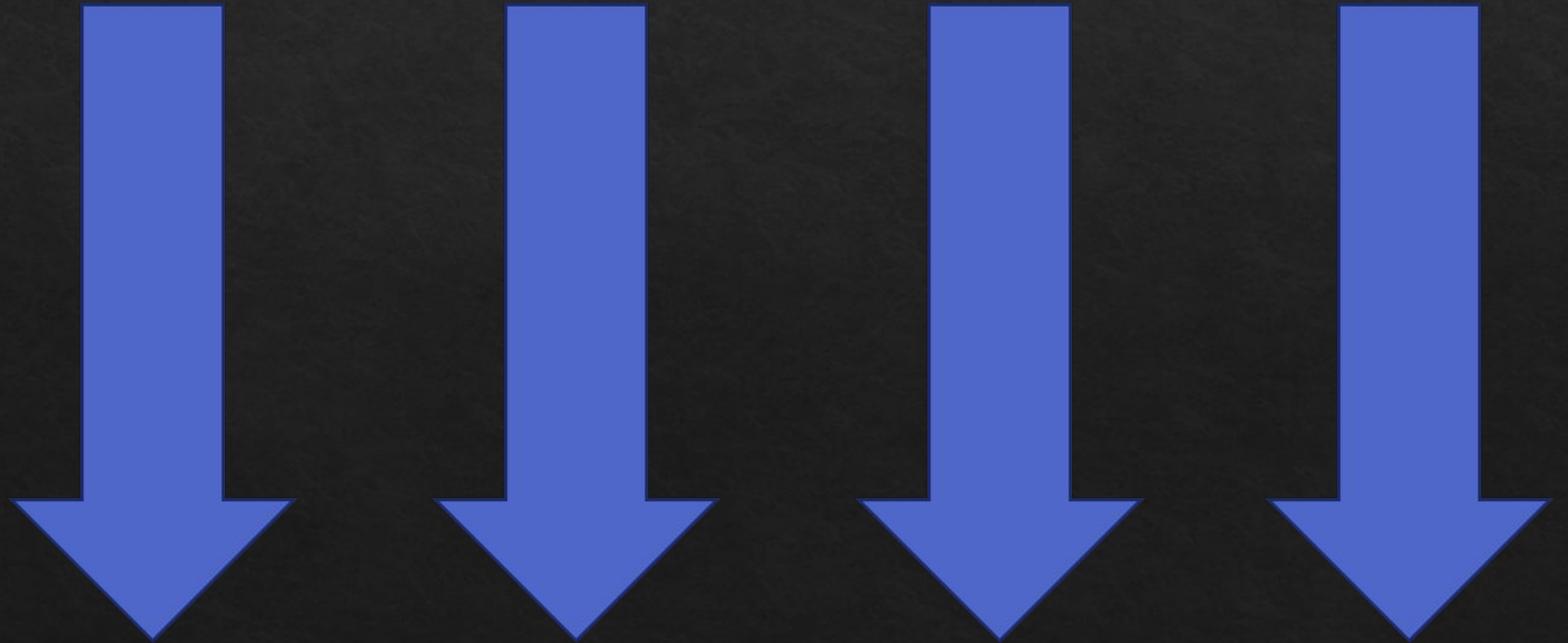
- ◆ However, advocates of behaviourism such as Watson (1982) argued that imitation and practice are crucial in any language learning, whereas others such as believe that “repetitive oral practice, direct teaching, or language imitation serve no purpose except to frustrate the students and teachers”.



Who is Jean Piaget?

Jean Piaget (9 August 1896 – 16 September 1980) was a Swiss psychologist known for his work on child development. Piaget's theory of cognitive development and epistemological view are together called "genetic epistemology".

The child develops cognitively through active involvement with the environment, and each new step in development builds on and becomes integrated with previous steps. Because two of the four shifts in developmental stage normally occur during the elementary school years, it is important for language teachers working with children to keep the characteristics of each cognitive stage in mind (Piaget, 1963). They are as follows:



- 1) The stage of sensory-motor intelligence (age 0 to 2 years). During this stage, behavior is primarily motor. The child does not yet internally represent events and “think” conceptually, although “cognitive” development is seen as schemata are constructed.
- 2) The stage of preoperational thought (age 2 to 7 years). This stage is characterized by the development of language and other forms of representation and rapid conceptual development. Reasoning during this stage is pre-logical or semi-logical, and children tend to be very egocentric. Children often focus on a single feature of a situation at a time—for example, they may be able to sort by size or by color but not by both characteristics at once.
- 3) The stage of concrete operations (age 7 to 11 years). During these years, the child develops the ability to apply logical thought to concrete problems. Hands-on, concrete experiences help children understand new concepts and ideas. Using language to exchange information becomes much more important than in earlier stages, as children become more social and less egocentric.
- 4) The stage of formal operations (age 11 to 15 years or older). During this stage, the child’s cognitive structures reach their highest level of development. The child becomes able to apply logical reasoning to all classes of problems, including abstract problems either not coming from the child’s direct experience or having no concrete referents.

- ◆ Piaget discusses several processes relevant to the way children know and understand the world: through schemas, assimilation and accommodation, organization and equilibration. Schemas refer to what develops in the brain of a child while trying to construct and understand the world - in other words, mental representations organizing the knowledge. Piaget argues that a very young child would be characterized by behavioral schemas (simple physical activities like grasping something or watching someone) whereas later on, mental schemas develop (meaning cognitive activities such as strategies for problem solving or the classification of objects). Adults of course have much more complex schemas of functioning in the world than children do.

Piaget used the terms 'assimilation' and 'accommodation' to refer to the process through which children construct their new knowledge. Assimilation usually takes place when the children's new experiences are incorporated into or fit in with the image of the world they hold in their minds. On the other hand, accommodation is the process of reconstructing the inner image to fit the new experience (Wadsworth, 1996)

For instance, if a child has an experience of playing with a small toy that has a keyboard and screen, and after some time (no matter how long), the same child comes across a computer, in this case the child will use his/her previous knowledge about that object which is stored in his/her mind to explore the new object which is the computer. The integration of the two experiences broadens the child's knowledge and facilitates the process of learning. Thus, it can be said that "assimilation and accommodation processes work in a complementary way with each other to give organization to our ever-growing knowledge and understanding".

Unlike Piaget who argued that “language plays a role in the development of children’s thinking and understanding but it is not the driving force”, Bruner viewed language as the most important tool for cognitive growth, and investigated how adults use language to mediate the world for children and help them to solve problems. Supporting a child in carrying out an activity has been labelled ‘scaffolding’ in which the teacher’s task is to push the learner one step at a time beyond where he is now. That is, to provide the child with the necessary support until he/she can stand on his/her own feet.



Vygotsky emphasized the role of the child's interaction with the people around them, such as parents and peers, and therefore he stated that “with the help of adults, children can do and understand much more than they can on their own” (Cameron, 2001: 6). What the child can do with help of the adult is known as the child's ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) which was defined by Vygotsky (1978) as;



Conclusion

Researchers interested in teaching young learners have proposed various ideas and principles that can guide language teachers in how to teach young learners, what skills they should introduce first, how to choose and establish effective activities, and what kind of support young learners need at each stage. Teachers of young learners should have clear idea about the process of acquiring the first language as well as the psychological development of the child. In addition, they should know how and when learners need to be supported in the classroom. For instance, teachers should explain to the children the task, encourage them to carry out it by themselves, encourage learners to ask and answer questions, encourage pair and group work, praise success, and intervene if the group is clearly stuck.