

ТАЪЛИМ ОЛИШДА ТИЛНИНГ НАЗАРИЙ ТАЪРИФИ



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TEACHING ENGLISH SPEAKING AND LISTENING SKILLS TO YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN THE CONTEXT OF UZBEKISTAN'S CONTINUING EDUCATION SYSTEM

Мақолада инглиз тилини ёш тил ўрганувчиларга ўқитиш хусусиятлари, бошланғич синф ўқувчиларига инглиз тилини ўқитишнинг психологик, лингвистик аспектлари, инглиз тилида гаплашиш ва тинглаб тушуниш кўникмаларини ўргатиш мисолида муҳокама қилинади. Шунингдек, мақолада Ўзбекистонда чет тилларни ўқитиш ва ўрганиш соҳасида олиб борилаётган ислохотлар таҳлил қилинади.

В статье обсуждаются особенности обучения иностранным языкам учеников младших классов, анализируются психологические и лингвистические аспекты обучения учеников начальных классов на примере обучения говорению и слушанию. А также приводится анализ проводимых в Узбекистане реформ в сфере обучения иностранным языкам и оценивается их влияние на обучение учеников младших классов общеобразовательных школ.

The article discusses psychological, linguistic and methodological peculiarities of teaching young language learners on the example of teaching listening and speaking in the primary stage of education. Moreover, the author of the article also gives a brief analysis of foreign languages teaching system reform in Uzbekistan and its impact on teaching young language learners.

Калит сўзлар: тил, бошланғич синф дарсликлари, чет тилларни ўрганиш тизими, гапириш ва эшитиб тушунишни ўқитиш.

Ключевые слова: язык, учебники младших классов, система обучения иностранным языкам, обучение говорению и аудированию.

Key words: language, young learners, the system of learning foreign languages, teaching speaking and listening.

I. Introduction

In the modern world, learning the English language is not anymore an individual strive of a definite person for self-development, at present it is a routine

necessity which is prescribed by the requirements of social life. Knowledge of English makes a professional more competitive in comparison to a professional who does not possess this knowledge. In addition, opportunity to communicate in languages other than mother tongue makes it easy to travel and do business. In this sense English is one of the effective tools of communication. Thus, teaching English in the early years of education is considered as prerequisite in the system of education in many countries.

In this paper I will critically discuss pros and cons of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in primary school ages (6; 7-11), discuss the ways of scaffolding young learners (YL) in this process and discuss the impact of foreign language policies carried out in Uzbekistan in terms of teaching English to the selected group of YL.

II. Young Learners

Children begin to learn foreign languages in different ages and circumstances. Therefore, first of all, it is necessary to distinguish age differences in defining YL. Since there is a distinction between what children of the age of six can do and what children of the age of eleven can do, Scott and Ytreberg (1990) suggest the division of YL into two distinctive groups.

First group comprises children between the age of 5 and 7. Slattery and Willis (2005) also define this group as ‘very young learners’.

The second group comprises children of the ages between 8 and 10 (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990). Children who belong to this group, according to Slattery and Willis (2005), are termed as ‘young learners’. Undoubtedly, differences between these two groups are very large. Therefore, language teachers need to be aware of the peculiarities of a definite age group and adapt their teaching methods, techniques and styles according to the characteristics of the group.

Ellis (2014) proposes consensus in defining the term young learner for the sake of ELT professionals. According to her observations still there is a misunderstanding in defining the term. She suggests to adopt terms used in educational systems that young learners belong to (Ellis, 2014). Thus, the age group that comprises children between the ages of 6-11 is termed as ‘young learners, kids, primary, juniors and tweens’ (Ellis, 2014). In the context of Uzbekistan’s education system young learners of the ages between 6, 7 to 11 are called ‘primary school pupils’.

2.1 Advantages of Learning English in Primary Stage of Education

Although it is hard to prove the superiority of young learners in learning a foreign language (Cook, 2008), a lot of research show that age plays a crucial role in

the effective learning of languages. However, many studies carried out in this area suggest that younger learners learn some aspects of a foreign language such as pronunciation and listening better, while some areas, especially grammar, and vocabulary acquired slowly (Lynne, 2001). According to Lynne (2001) pronunciation and listening skills are acquired effectively in naturalistic setting whereas in classroom settings they are not effectively developed. Moreover, younger learners tend to acquire more native like accents, whereas for adult learners it is difficult to get rid of their mother tongue accent in L2 speech (Lightbown and Spada, 1999). Therefore, in the early years of education it is effective to emphasize on teaching speaking and listening rather than on writing and reading.

In addition, younger learners possess such advantages in language acquisition as brain plasticity, weaker group identity, less analytical thinking, and simplified input (Saville-Troike, 2012).

2.2 Challenges of Learning English Language in Primary Stage of Education

Apart from the fact that younger learners are good language learners in informal and naturalistic contexts (Saville-Troike, 2012), there are also challenges that young learners and their teachers may face in language classroom contexts. Saville-Troike (2012) claims that younger learners possess weaker brain capacity, which does not allow them to learn vocabulary of a foreign language effectively. Other disadvantages that younger learners may have include lack of L1 knowledge, shorter attention span, less world knowledge and analytical skills (Saville-Troike, 2012). In L2 classroom these disadvantages may cause several challenges for language teachers. First, primary school learners start learning grammar of their mother tongue in later grades. For instance, in the context of Uzbek public schools pupils are introduced with the grammar of L1 starting from grade 2, whereas learning a foreign language starts in grade 1, which does not allow a learner to transfer knowledge of L1 to L2 learning.

Second, the fact that children have shorter attention span requires from a teacher to develop shorter activities that do not overload YL. Moreover, teachers have to design activities which do not employ grammatical and lexical rules as YL tend to be less analytical.

III. Developing Listening and Speaking Skills of YL in the Classroom

3.1 Context and Learners

The teaching context for the discussion is the first grade pupils in public schools of Uzbekistan.

Most of the pupils in primary schools are monolingual learners with few or no previous experience of learning foreign languages, as most of the kindergartens and

nursery schools do not provide foreign languages instruction. Average class size of first graders in Uzbek schools is 25 to 28 pupils and English language classes are conducted by dividing the class into two small groups of 12 to 14 pupils. According to the results of recent research conducted by Blatchford (2007), class size has a great impact on the efficiency of teaching English to YL of 7 to 11 age group. As Blatchford (2007, p168) points out that small class size provides individualized teaching, makes it easier to control the classroom, and allows more time for marking, assessments and planning, and less teacher stress. The division of classes into small groups has been widely practiced in public schools and other educational institutions across Uzbekistan since the Soviet period. However, due to the lack of EFL teachers there are schools that can not afford class division, especially in rural areas.

According to national curriculum of public schools, first graders or primary class learners have 2 hours of English lessons every week, academic year averaging 33 weeks in total.

3.2 Listening and Speaking versus Young Learners

Tompkins (2002) argues that listening is an important skill for YL and it is assumed that about 50 per cent of classroom time involves listening. It is true that in naturalistic language learning context the main source of language input and output is through listening and speaking. In classroom settings spoken language prevails over written language, especially in primary stages of language education. Listening and speaking are both active use of language (Cameron, 2001). According Cameron (2001) unlike reading and writing, prevailing element in spoken language is meaning, by speaking children try to transfer their meaning and by listening they try to understand others' meaning. Therefore, children strive to build meaning through interacting with others which takes place in the form of listening and speaking in the early years of development. Next, Cameron (2001) explains that children's desire to communicate is a drive to speaking.

Teaching speaking and listening to YL involves plenty of natural language use in classroom settings. It is teacher's responsibility of expose YL to as many spoken language as possible in the classroom. In addition, in the early years of classroom language learning teacher plays the role of a main model for children in their learning to listen and speak. Additionally, exposure to foreign language should be carried with meaningful and purposeful activities. According to Vygotskian theories of development meaning in communication is constructed with the help of expert others (Cameron, 2001). Thus teacher plays the role of an expert other and creates Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) for YLs in their process of learning how to create meaning through listening and speaking. According to Saville-Troike

(2012, p112) ZPD is an “area of potential development where learner can achieve that development only with assistance”. In ZPD scaffolding plays an important role which is given by an expert other. Saville-Troike (2012) also argues that scaffolding occurs only with the active participation of a learner.

Teaching speaking according to Scott and Ytreberg (1990) is one of the most demanding tasks before the language teacher. One of the reasons for this is that most of the learners do not have an access to speaking practice outside the classroom and teachers need to dedicate most of the class time for the speaking activities, which on its own place require a lot of effort from a teacher. Another difficult aspect of teaching speaking is the issues of correcting and giving feedback to learners in speaking activities, which also requires special knowledge on how to correct and when to correct young learners.

It is worth mentioning that listening and speaking almost always come together and it is almost impossible to teach speaking without listening or vice versa. Pinter (2006, p45) claims that young learners need to be exposed to plenty of listening activities and practice with rich input, which as a result leads to speaking tasks.

3.3 The Ways of Teaching Speaking and Listening to YL

3.3.1 Listen and Do Activities

In primary stage of English language teaching listening and speaking activities should be accompanied by movements according to the spoken message. In this sense, Scott and Ytreberg (1990) suggest several methods of teaching listening to young learners, one of which is ‘listen and do’ activities. They also argue that most of the class instructions correspond to ‘listen and do’ activities and teacher’s instructions to students to perform one or another activity plays an important role in developing their listening skills. Moreover, teacher can easily see whether learners have understood the instruction e.g. listening or not (Scott and Ytreberg, 1990). Scott and Ytreberg (1990) also suggest other ‘listen and do’ activities which include mime the story activity, listen and draw and others. In mime the story activity the teacher reads or tells the story and performs the actions described in the story with learners. In a listen and draw activity teacher, a learner or a recording describes an object and learners draw it.

3.3.2 Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response (TPR) perhaps is the most widely used methods of teaching foreign languages to young learners. Its advantages in teaching listening and speaking are numerous. Total Physical Response is a method invented by Prof. James Asher in 1970s (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). Asher (in Richards and

Rodgers, 2001) believes that children acquire their first language through physical response to language inputs. Their first introduction with language occurs when their parents give commands to perform different actions before they start producing their own speech. One of the underlying principles of TPR in classroom is the reduction of learners' affective filter and to facilitate the process of learning the language. Affective filter is a mechanism that allows or restricts the processing of input (Saville-Troike, 2012). Thus by reducing the affective filter, learners feel themselves free to perform actions instructed by their teachers and learn the language, especially spoken and listening skills. In this process teacher plays an important role of a facilitator by creating favorable atmosphere for learners. Another important aspect of TPR is comprehension, e.g. understanding the spoken input provided by the teacher. Therefore, learners should practice a lot by doing different activities that mostly involve listening comprehension and then move to production of their own utterances (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). The advantage of using TPR with young learners is that it provides a lot of amusement, fun and movement for young learners and makes it possible to keep them motivated during the whole lesson. Another advantage of TPR is in giving feedback to learners. Richards and Rodgers (2001) suggest that teachers should adopt the way how most of parents correct their children e.g. teachers should use less immediate correction of spoken output produced by learners in the initial stages of learning, as immediate feedback or correction may result in the increase of learners' affective filter.

Despite many benefits of TPR, it has some challenges to implement in the classroom both for the learners and the teacher. Cameron (2001) believes that there are possible dangers when children can not construct meaning during the lessons. This is especially important while giving commands and instructions using the TPR method. That is why is it very important for a teacher to make sure that the message uttered towards the learners is accessible.

3.3.3 Dialogues and Role Play

Sesnan (1997) states that easy to perform dialogues encourage the use of spoken language effectively. Scott and Ytreberg (1990, p39) claim that for a teacher using a dialogue with learners is an easy and useful way to bridge between guided practice and freer practice activities. In the initial introducing of a dialogue to young learners teachers are recommended to use various objects such as puppets, pictures to scaffold the construction of meaning. The teacher may move to the stage of performing the dialogue with learners putting them in pairs or groups. Another option of doing the dialogue activity is to ask and lead two or more learners to perform the dialogue in front of the class, thus giving a model to other learners. Scott and Ytreberg (1990) also suggest employing movements, actions, mimics and intonation in presenting a dialogue to young learners which helps them to feel the dialogue from different perspectives.

Role plays containing dialogues is another type of effective activity which is beneficial and entertaining for learners. In introducing learners with role plays, Scott and Ytreberg (1990) suggest teachers to move from structured to more free type of activity. The best way to do this is, first, let the young learners learn the dialogue by heart and then act it in pairs or groups in front of the class. In assigning the roles and movements that accompany dialogues teachers should consider psychological features of each learner in order to not to affect their affective filter. It is also important to remember about giving a model before each activity or performance.

IV. Language Policies in Uzbekistan and Their Impact on TEYL

The start of incorporation of English language into the education system of Uzbekistan dates back to 1932 (Hasanova, 2007). However, teaching and learning of EFL was carried out in secondary schools e.g. with the start of fifth grade when pupils were at the age of 12 (Hasanova, 2007). As Hasanova (2007, p4) points out most of the classes during that era were mainly student centered and were dedicated to analytical readings, grammatical rules, and translation exercises. According to Gulyamova, Irgasheva and Bolitho (2014, p45) the reasons for this were “the tendency for the country’s institutions to remain sealed off from foreign influences, particularly those from the West, ...” and “These deficiencies were passed on from generation to generation of Uzbek English teachers, all steeped in a Soviet-rooted version of the Grammar-Translation method, and reliant on outdated textbooks”. After gaining the independence from Soviet Union in 1991, great attention has been paid to the reformation of education system, especially teaching and learning foreign languages. However, teaching methods and approaches remained the same as in Soviet era for 20 years. According to Hasanova (2008, p139) Uzbek teachers

were exposed to modern approaches to ELT as communicative language teaching in mid 1990's, however "continued lack of financial support and insufficient teacher training have made CLT more a topic of discussion rather than an approach being implemented in many Uzbek classrooms".

Recent analyses of the system of organization of learning foreign languages revealed that educational standards, curricula and textbooks did not fully meet modern requirements, especially in the use of achievements of foreign language teaching methodology, IT and media technologies. This situation led to the issue of the presidential decree No. 1875 on December 12, 2012 *On Further Measures of Improving the System of Learning Foreign Languages*, which clearly outlined the further aims and tasks of reforming the system of learning foreign languages. One of the first steps that have been taken after the decree, in order to implement the reforms, was designing and adoption of a new national educational standard for continuing education system (Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2013) which is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001).

According to the new standard teaching foreign languages in schools begins in the first grade of the primary schools, when children are at the age of 6-7. And by the end of primary stage (grades 1-4) of education pupils have to achieve A1 level according to the national curriculum and CEFR. The widespread introduction of teaching English language in primary education around the world, including in Uzbekistan, is described by Johnstone as "the world's biggest policy development in education" (in Copland, Garton, and Burns, 2014, p738). There are several reasons for this. First, it is better to begin learning foreign languages as early as possible (Copland, Garton and Burns, 2014). Second, wide use of English in the process of globalization and integration of market economies, workforce with English language skills considered to be an advantage.

The impact of the new curriculum and EFL reform in Uzbekistan was huge on pre-service and in-service teacher training, materials design and teachers' continuing professional development areas. The new standard required the whole system of foreign languages teaching to rethink and reform the approaches used in educational institutions.

The new textbook series titled Kids' English (Irisqulov et al., 2014) for primary schools were designed and published based on the new standard. Mandatory cascade in-service teacher trainings were held after the publication of the textbooks in all regions of Uzbekistan with the purpose of training teachers to teach YL and using the new textbook.

Unlike previous textbooks Kids' English incorporates wide use of Total Physical Response, Communicative Language Teaching, using games, songs and

pictures and other modern approaches to teaching YL. However, Enever and Moon (in Copland, 2014) point out that communicative language teaching is an approach to be used with adult learners in small groups.

Discussing the advantages, disadvantages and impact of reforms introduced in Uzbekistan's education system in terms of teaching foreign languages in primary public schools is early since there was not conducted any kind of comprehensive study in this area in Central Asian countries.

V. Conclusion

To sum up, in this paper I made an attempt to critically evaluate the benefits of using listen and do activities, TPR method and dialogues and role plays in teaching listening and speaking to young learners. In addition I tried to investigate possible ways of scaffolding young learners in the process of acquiring these skills. Nevertheless, TEYL is a wide branch of ELT and requires deeper consideration of all aspects of teaching them, especially in classroom contexts.

TEYL in classroom settings is a comparatively new trend in ELT. And in the context of Uzbekistan teaching English to primary school learners is only 2 years old. Bearing in mind the complexity of TEYL there are still a lot of things to be done in this sphere in Uzbekistan.

In teaching English to young learners the ultimate aim should not be build around the effective teaching and learning of the English language but also around the psychological, physical and emotional development of young learners in their first years at school.

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