



MIROSLAW BABIARZ ¹, **MARTA ZAPALA-KRAJ**²

The Importance and Chosen Techniques of Teaching Very Young Learners to Write in English

¹ Doktor habilitowany profesor nadzwyczajny UJK, Uniwersytet Jana Kochanowskiego w Kielcach, Wydział Pedagogiczny i Artystyczny, Instytut Edukacji Szkolnej, Zakład Wspomagania Rozwoju i Edukacji Dziecka, Poland

² Magister, Uniwersytet Jana Kochanowskiego w Kielcach, Wydział Pedagogiczny i Artystyczny, Instytut Edukacji Szkolnej, Zakład Wspomagania Rozwoju i Edukacji Dziecka, Poland

Abstract

The aim of the following paper is to introduce the aspect of teaching writing to very young pupils. The paper briefly presents the characteristics of young learners, together with their needs and requirements – mostly referring to the teachers of English. The paper was based on author's own experiences as the former teacher of very young and young students and so, it points out some useful techniques as well as personal observations rooted in the theory of methodology, which were successful in teaching English to that particular age group.

Keywords: Very young learners, teaching, writing, techniques, atmosphere, mind-maps, tracing

The early introduction of foreign languages (FLs) in kindergarten and primary school has expanded in Europe in the last 20 years. The European Commission's White Paper 'Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society' (1995) considers that European citizens should be proficient in three community languages and recommends foreign language teaching at pre-school level in order to allow for second foreign languages in secondary school (Singleton, 2003, p. 77).

English, as a world-wide language, created the situation in which people learn English as early as possible. Over at least fifteen last years in Poland, it can be observed that English is taught even before the children enter the elementary school. This is supported by the fact that the optimum age of acquisition of a foreign language is when learners are still in a very young age.

Characteristic Features of Young Learners

Phillips (1993, p. 5), the author of *Young Learners* defines such learners as children from the first year of formal schooling (five or six years old) to eleven or twelve years of age. At the same time Scott and Ytreberg point out that there

is huge difference between what a five year old child can learn and the potential of the ten-year-old (Scott, Ytreberg, 1990, p. 1).

Out of the common beliefs referring to the age of the learners, Harmer enumerates one which is the most important: that the younger learner, the faster progress of studying (Harmer, 2001, p. 37). Singleton (2003) quotes Heighington, a teacher from the United Kingdom who referred to primary school children in the following way: “They have no awkwardness or inhibitions with the new language and are not at all bothered about making mistakes. Most significant of all, they soak up new language and ideas rather as a sponge does water” (Heighington, 1996, p. 57).

Indeed, according to Harmer (2000, p. 37), children learn indirectly, absorbing the knowledge from the world around them, not focusing on one particular aspect of grammar for example. Secondly, young learners learn through experiencing – seeing, touching and hearing about various things. Moreover, they have an inborn interest in learning and the deep need to discover various things. What one should remember it that children require individual attention and serious approval from the teacher. The main drawback of teaching young learners is their limited attention span – they easily get bored and lose focus after about ten minutes. In addition, it is also worth reminding that children are able to acquire a foreign language – including its pronunciation – with a native or near-native competence as Lecumberri and Gallardo (2003) explain (in: Singleton, 2003, p. 116).

Below, there are presented abilities of the youngest learners as far as their attitude towards being involved in activities within classroom etc.:

- They can understand direct human interaction;
- They can talk about what they are doing and also they are able to tell about what they have done or heard;
- They can plan activities due to the fact that they most of the time use their vivid imaginations;
- They can argue for something and tell you why they think what they think and what can be surprising but it is a fact – children *can* use logical reasoning.

Other characteristics of the young language learner involve the activities which prove that kids at the age of five to seven are not that simple to be taught as it may seem. As Cameron (2001, p. xii) points out:

Children do have a less complicated view of the world than older children and adults, but this fact does not imply that teaching children is simple or straightforward. On the contrary, the teacher of children needs to be highly skilled to reach into children's worlds and lead them to develop their understandings towards more formal, more extensive and differently organised concepts.

It is also misleading to think that children will only learn simple language, such as colours and numbers, nursery rhymes and songs, and talking about themselves. Of course, if that, is all they are taught, that will be all that they can learn. But children can always do more than adults think they can; they have huge learning potential, and the foreign language classroom does not support and help them if teachers do not exploit that potential.

In order to provide young learners with supportive and encouraging surrounding for teaching, teachers should organize classrooms so that there is a lot of bright colours and light.

Wendy A. Scott and Lisbeth H. Ytreberg explain that: “Playing with the language ... is a very natural stage in the first stages of foreign language learning” (Ytreberg, Scott, 1990, p. 4–5). The teacher cannot also forget about various approaches towards such students. Children like working in groups but they also want to be treated individually and have a teacher on his/ her own from time to time.

It is obvious that age may seem to create an abstract barrier which each and single language learner has to overcome but appropriate attitude, motivation and of course learning conditions can be of great help, leading to a child’s success. Therefore, Harmer postulates the question: “How can teachers ensure that their students feel positive about learning [...]?” (Harmer, 2001, p. 74). According to the recent influence of communicative teaching theories the programs are finally leveled with the actual educational needs of the students, not with the assumed requirements and forms of their fulfillment.

The Importance of Writing

Due to the fact that teachers are afraid of young learners abilities at the stage when they just started to write in L1 writing skills in L2 seem or sometimes under-estimated area in language teaching. Teachers definitely prefer speaking and reading activities, as if they are more ‘safe’. Zawodniak (2005, p. 28), however, claims that it is possible to actively involve children in writing and thus make it a valuable support for early language learning.

The methodologists state that people learn by watching others and that the environment in which they learn makes a difference in how quickly and how effectively they learn. Furthermore, mastering abilities in any area requires more than learning and being able to keep that knowledge. For learners to become skilful, they must feel confident and they must be aware how well they are doing along the way. That is why, according to Bratcher (1997, p. 4): “[...] before children can deal with the cognitive challenges of writing that develop their competence, they must feel safe, they must feel as though they are part of a community of writers, and they must feel respected: they must be comfortable and confident”.

Therefore, from the above observations the idea can be drawn that children can begin and master their writing abilities when they are feeling *comfortable* in the writing classroom, accepted no matter what their current level of skill with writing might be, feeling that they are a part of a community that includes their colleagues as well as the teacher.

Zawodniak, in her article discusses two of the influential in twentieth century methodological views – that of Montessori and Vygotsky. The first of the researchers pointed out that at the early process of development child likes to involve in various activities which are connected with movement and writing is one of them. Vygotski reasoned that children’s ability to learn L1 and L2 at the same time is not only possible but advisable due to the fact that one language influences the second one. Zawodniak states that:

[...] the child learns by performing concrete operations, and writing is one of them; it provides him/her with a product that can be looked at, admired, displayed, reflected on and/or compared with others; this is why he/she feels as the creator and owner of something special which motivates him/her to work even harder; writing in L2 is a considerable cognitive challenge for the child as it has not been a long time since he/she began to develop this skill in L1; for this reason he/she attends to L2 writing with curiosity and openness; (Zawodniak, 2005, p. 29).

As it is seen, writing is the process that should trigger interest and develop in the needed direction but at the same time it cannot be overwhelming and intimidating for the small learner. Learning writing should associate with pleasure and as an activity it should be the reason for pride not frustration.

Especially, that as many researchers point out, the process of learning to write is not a series of stages or steps. For example Sockett *et al.* discover on a basis of various researches, and observations that children’s writing is not a linear step-by-step process, rather, it is a process of development that takes each child on a uniquely progressive learning journey based on that specific child’s experiences, strengths, weaknesses, and confidence in the acquisition and consistent practice of skills (Sockett *et al.*, 2001, p. 109–110). It proves that children do not progress linearly from one stage to the next but move a kind of freely in and out of the given stage. In the opinion of Sockett, these individual developmental journeys took place in a helix-like fashion rather than linearly (Ibid.).

Some techniques of teaching writing to children

There is no doubt that the age factor greatly influences the approach of the teacher to the methods chosen to teach. Nevertheless, Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991, p. 126) assumes that, second language acquisition is successful whether the learner begins as a child or an adult and that adults are really better learners because they start off faster.

The earlier teachers start developing the writing skills in their children the better. Nowadays, teaching writing in Poland is even possible in the kindergarten – by means of making things from paper, drawing or when the children play with the molding- clay. This way they start developing their fine motorics which will help them in future to master the handwriting. Also, Kotarba (2005, p. 11), in her article in *The Teacher* postulates: “Although young learners may not be able to write, it is never too early to build a strong foundation for a love of writing!”.

Writing activities, like oral activities, go from being tightly controlled to being completely free. Teachers usually do more guided activities with beginners, but what is important is not to exclude very simple free activities which allow for self-expression at however low a level. In general, controlled and guided activities are being done to practice the language and concentration is on the language itself.

Controlled writing

As the name suggests, is the process of teaching which involves straight, direct instructions which pupils need to fulfill. During the time of the activities teacher acts as a controller and supervisor but also his or her role is to help and support when needed.

Overwriting, matching, coping and dictation are the four forms of activities suggested by Zawodniak (2005, p. 28) on this level of education.

- **Overwriting** is a task which involves tracing the dots that create a letter or a word, for example:

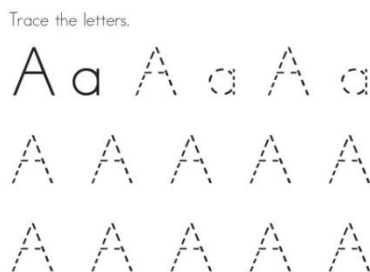


Fig. 1. Overwriting example (fonts4teachersblog.com: 2011-04-14)

As Zawodniak points out regarding the guided writing: “the teacher moves from direct supervision to indirect assistance where gentle suggestions enable the child to search for the best solution and more freely express his/her own needs, feelings and interests” (Zawodniak, 2005, p. 30).

- **Fill-in exercises** are useful activities, especially at the beginner stages. They do not require much active production of language, since most of the language is given, but they do require understanding. Fill-in exercises can be used

for vocabulary work. For example, if the pupils are familiar with the words for pets and a few adjectives, then this text has meaning even though there is no picture to put it in a context.

- **Dictation** – trying to dictating only half a sentence and asking pupils to complete it in their own way is a good starting point. For example:

- I like.....
- I don't like.....
- I hate.....
- I love.....

Discovery Writing

The above part presented the examples of activities designed to develop the pupils' writing, with most of the language being provided for them. Pupils then need to be able to try out their language in a freer way. In free activities the language is the pupils' own language, no matter what their level is. The teacher should be the initiator and helper, and, of course, is responsible for seeing that the task can be done by the pupils at that level. The more language the children have, the easier it is to work on free writing activities. According to Zawodniak: "In discovery writing children become cooperative and inquisitive 'creators' of the language as they play and experiment with it on a trial-and-error basis; as for the teacher, he/she initiates the activity and monitors it with the intention of providing feedback" (Zawodniak, 2005, p. 30).

- **Mind mapping**

First it is important to put the key word on the blackboard. For example the class is going to write about pets, so the *dog* is a key word. The class can be put into groups and they should be asked to write down all the words they can think about connected with dogs. Often pupils want to put in a word they do not know the English word for. The teacher can let them write it in their own language and he or she will fill it in in English later. When all the groups have made their word stars, the teacher may choose one and transfer it to the blackboard for everyone. This gives the whole class not only words, but also ideas about what to write.

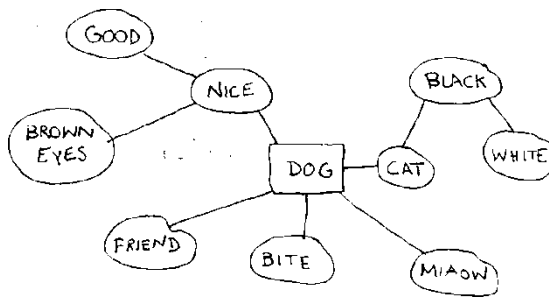


Fig. 2. Author's own material from kindergarten English classes

- **Synthesizing**

Zawodniak describes this activity as the one during which pupils' aim is to 'discover' L2 words throughout 'breaking a code'. The code is based on simple drawings (Zawodniak, 2005, p. 32). The procedure looks in the following way: "[...] each learner is given a sheet of paper with a row of little, horizontally arranged pictures glued onto it; the pictures illustrate objects whose names are familiar to children from previous lessons; above there are numbers which correspond to the letters that are to be found within each of the words represented by the pictures; 'discovered' (synthesized) letters written in the empty spaces under the pictures make a new word. Young learners enjoy this activity as they are curious about encoded words and their relation to the lesson" (Zawodniak, 2005, p. 32).

Invention of new classroom practices and approaches to designing language programs and materials reflects a commitment to finding more efficient and more effective ways of teaching languages. With the Internet, the teachers have a wider variety of methodological options to choose from than ever before. They can choose methods and materials according to the needs of learners or the preferences of their own.

Students remember words better when they relate new meanings to knowledge they already have. Group discussion of word meanings also helps students learn new vocabulary by having to actively participate in their own learning and therefore the teacher's role as it was mentioned above, is to provide learners with an enjoyable and encouraging activity (Stahl, Nagy, 2006: 37).

Only' are not enough when tackling activities with children. The teacher p.of very young learners will need to have plenty of objects and pictures to work with, and to make full use of the school and their surroundings. But the most important is to demonstrate what the teacher wants them to do. The balance will change as the children get older, but appealing to the senses will always help the pupils to learn. Ytreberg and Scott give also 3 points to consider when dealing with the youngest learners of language:

- a) **Play with the language**

- The teacher should let the pupils talk to themselves. Making up rhymes, singing songs and telling stories is what makes up a 'play with the language'.

- b) **Variety in the classroom**

- Since concentration and attention spans are short, variety is something that is necessary – variety of activities, variety of pace, variety of organization and variety of voice.

- c) **Routines**

- Children benefit from knowing the rules and being familiar with the situation. Having systems, routines, organizing and planning the lessons ahead is very important.

The factors mentioned above, together with teacher's real involvement and passion will not only be beneficial for young learners but potentially will make them fall in love with English. As it is seen, writing is the process that should trigger interest and develop in the needed direction but at the same time it cannot be overwhelming and intimidating for the small learner. Learning writing should associate with pleasure and as an activity it should be the reason for pride not frustration.

It is worth to remember that: "Words should be enjoyed, and the study of words should bring no less joy" (Takač, 2008, p. 69).

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