

Is younger better?

The Critical Period Hypothesis, and the assumption that children learn languages more easily than adults, has given rise to the idea that younger is better, and this argument is often used to support the early introduction of second language learning.

Such a bold statement is problematic – it is not that simple! So, when parents and educators ask us 'is younger better?' we can't help but want to reply: *Better for what?*

Empirical studies offer mixed findings¹. While some support the hypothesis, others suggest that age is not relevant for improved second language learning; instead, perhaps more important – amongst other things – are the learning context, and how well we understand the needs of the whole child.

Some common (mis)beliefs include:

'The younger the child starts, the better their pronunciation will be.'

Yes, young children are excellent mimics, and often less afraid than adults of playing around with the sounds of English, but it is important also to consider that they often have limited exposure to English outside of the more formal language learning context.

Attending English lessons a few hours a week is nothing like learning a second language in an immersion or bilingual programme, where learners are exposed to a second language for large amounts of time. Learning a second language is not likely to result in a bilingual or fluent speaker, especially not in the early years.

• In our experience, however, if children are given opportunities to hear good models of English – through natural speech, songs and rhymes – they will, over time, pick up a clear pronunciation and gain fluency.

'Young children haven't yet acquired an affective filter.'

Yes, children can be curious and willing to try new things, and certainly are not afraid of experimenting with language, but they can also become shy, nervous and have not yet developed the learning strategies and coping mechanisms of their older peers.

They also may be schooling years ahead of them with various teaching methods, or may not, have the same approach or level of understanding at the same level.

Certainly, a positive first language learning experience will affect how learners feel about learning English – this cannot guarantee future success and continued confidence.

In order to stay motivated and interested in English, the children will need to continue to feel good about it, be in a safe and supportive environment that is the right level of challenge – and learn to feel 'they like'!

• In our experience, if teachers of English are aware of the needs of very young learners and plan activities which take the whole child into consideration, a child's English experience will be a positive one.

'The more time learning English, the more proficient they will be when they get to High School and important exams.'

Yes, it does seem logical that increased input = increased output, and the number of years of exposure, does affect the level of 'access', but, again, it is unfortunately not as straightforward as that, for there are so many factors that contribute to successful learning.

• All as those we have already mentioned – eg exposure, learner and pedagogical approaches – these include a child's personality, aptitude, intelligence, contextual factors, motivation, attitudes toward English as a language and toward English cultures ... and the list goes on.

• In our experience, if an early English learning initiative respects the way children learn, involves close collaboration with parents, and the transition is planned carefully, it is more likely that a child will become a successful language learner and confident user of English.

A better indicator than starting age for future success in another language is the amount and type of exposure to English, and the opportunities for extended discourse.

Whilst this book is not intended to answer the question 'is younger better?', it is our opinion that, by providing children with a positive and meaningful learning environment that considers the whole child, it is more likely to result in happy and confident language learners.

This is our route in *Teaching English to Pre-Primary Children*.



Explaining

Teaching pre-primary children might evoke all sorts of emotions and responses, from *Wow! Fantastic! to Arggh! Help!* We hope that you are reading this book because you want to do it effectively, which means understanding the young children you will be teaching, as well as the context in which you will be working:

- There is a lot to know about teaching pre-primary learners, and so some explanations may help at this point. We hope you will look at the information with a view to getting a better understanding of your learners.
- Later, in Part C, we will give these ideas further consideration, as part of your personal and professional development.

1 Concepts and contexts

The first step is to explain our terms.

Primary education

Let us start with primary education, which most readers are likely to be familiar with. Primary education is often – though not always – the first stage of compulsory education. However, the starting age differs from country to country.

If we could generalise, we might say that primary education begins the year a child turns six, but in some countries – the UK, for example – children start school at four years old, and in Nordic and Eastern or Central European countries, children start as late as seven.

Pre-primary education

Pre-primary education has many different meanings around the world – *day care, play groups, nursery, kindergarten, school reception, kindergarten, KG-school, preschool, school pre-primary* – and each name means something different depending on the country it is used in.

What needs to be clear is that *care and education* are interchangeable in these different settings, for, as we care for children, we are making an important contribution to their 'successful lifelong learning, social integration, personal development and later employability'².

'Pre-school' and 'kindergarten' seem to be the most common labels in mainstream education. However, in this book, we shall always refer to 'pre-primary education' because it is a designation used by UNESCO to describe the stage in 'Early Childhood Education and Care' (ECEC), which includes the care and education of children from birth to primary education.

The stages in ECEC are:

Stage 1: Early childhood educational development – focusing on from birth to two years old, also called 'infants and toddlers', which is beyond the scope of this book.

Stage 2: Pre-primary education – focusing on children from three years to the start of primary education.

In *Teaching English to Pre-Primary Children*, as we are suggesting approaches to language education with children from three years to the start of primary education, here are some of the terms we use:

- **'Pre-primary children'** refers to children between three years and beginning primary education. We do not use the term 'very young learners' as it is used in the ELT profession, as it does not clearly indicate the age or educational stage of the children concerned, and can be misinterpreted and lead to confusion.
- **'Settings'** refer to the place in which we work with the children (kindergarten, pre-school, nursery, etc).
- **'Lesson'** refers to a specific time, with a clear beginning and end, in which English is the main vehicle for communication; we are using the term 'lesson', which has more formal connotations.
- **'Educator'** is a pre-primary practitioner who has been trained to educate children; to support and develop their learning through play, and to give them all the skills, confidence and tools they need to be school-ready³.
- **'Teacher of English'** is a teacher who has trained to teach English – often, though not always, to learners who are older than six years old.
- **'Child'** or **'children'** are used, rather than 'pupil' or 'student', because we are educating children, who we view as social actors in their own right⁴ and as competent and insightful learners – learning about life and the world around them every moment of their day. Also, we prefer not to refer to 'pupil' or 'student', as these labels are generally used to refer to older learners.
- **'Room'** is usually used instead of classroom, once again to avoid more formal connotations.
- **'Enjoyment'** is used over and above 'fun', as we want to move away from implying something is 'light-hearted or trivial', to considering it 'satisfying, beneficial and useful'⁵ for learning and development.
- **'L1'** is the common school language or, when applicable, the children's home language(s), which may be different to the language used in the ECEC setting.

Pre-primary education around the world

The issue of ECEC is a tricky one. In many countries, education is not compulsory for this age group, although – through a mix of

private and public institutions – an educational programme can reach as many as 90 percent of five year olds in developed countries¹.

Naturally, different countries draw upon different philosophical traditions in their approach to education. However, UNESCO² recommends that pre-primary programmes focus on children's language and social skills, logical and reasoning skills, alphabetical and mathematical concepts, and aim to develop a child's understanding of the world:

- Activities are usually play-based, and encourage self-discovery and interaction between peers, which contributes to developing an autonomous child.
- During pre-primary education, children become socialised into the culture of school and learning, and develop into responsible members of their society.

Living and working in Europe means this is the context that we, the authors, know best, and much of what we write about here is based on our experience in a European context. That said, Europe is diverse in its approach to ECEC – despite the existence of a common ECEC vision and clear European goals³, which include child well-being, universal access, inclusion and participation.

However, regardless of this variety across European countries, there are a number of common practices within ECEC, which include the following⁴:

- Responding to the needs of young children, promoting their emotional well-being and encouraging active engagement in learning.
- Undertaking educational practices and learning strategies which sustain children's curiosity, rather than focusing on formalised learning which does not meet children's developmental potential.
- Implementing a curriculum that combines adult-initiated, child-initiated activities, in order to sustain children's active engagement in the learning process. This involves allowing the children to make their own decisions about their learning, organising group interactions, providing a variety of resources which respond to the children's interests, and using play as a way in which the children understand their world and develop their knowledge – with adult support.
- Establishing a strong commitment to working with parents, including the involvement of parents in making decisions about the education and care of their children, which can promote higher levels of parental engagement in their children's learning at home.

Pre-primary education in English

The teaching of English as a foreign language has advanced from being something that was only learned about in upper-primary, to something more widely spilling profusely into pre-primary education⁵. This is largely due to a push from parents to ensure their children develop their English language linguistic capital⁶ as soon as possible, based on the belief that younger is better:

- Officially, at the time of writing, few countries provide statutory education that includes English to children under six years old.
- Unofficially, English is mushrooming in state and private pre-primary institutions in Asia, South America and Europe.

Pre-primary education in your context

The context in which you find yourself teaching English in pre-primary will be dependent upon your geographical location. The philosophy of education within your national context, the existence of a national curriculum for pre-primary education, the coverage of pre-primary education, and whether it is mostly state or privately funded, the status of pre-primary education within the education system, and the post-scholarship education they receive, and local policies regarding pre-primary education.

These factors are inter-related, but it is important that you are clear about the pre-primary education system in the country where you work, about the practices of educating pre-primary children, and who is responsible for educating the children.

There is a link to the beginning of Part B to help you get to know your context.

2 The whole child

A challenge for all [pre-primary] teachers of English is to have the knowledge, skills and sensitivities of a teacher of children and of a teacher of language and to be able to balance and combine the two successfully.

Jean Brewster, Gail Ellis and Denis Girard¹⁴

Many of us became teachers of English in pre-primary because we know about teaching English, yet not all of us have studied to be educators of children:

- It is one of the dichotomies of the language profession; either you are a teacher of English, or you are an educator of children.
- It is a rarity that we have been trained to be both.

A common response we get from many teachers of English when we tell them we work with pre-primary children is: 'But they can't read or write. How do you teach them?'

This is because most teachers of English are trained to use a board, and to plan their lessons around the written word. Ensuring the four skills are included in a lesson is the backbone of any teacher-training module in lesson planning.

So, how do we teach pre-primary children a foreign language? Our response is always: 'We teach the whole child through English.'

It is because most of us are teachers of English that we have written this book, although educators of pre-primary children – who might also need to teach English – will hopefully find it useful, too.

- Teachers of English need to know about pre-primary children, and understand how to use what they know about language to their advantage.
- Educators need to know about English, and know how to use what they know about pre-primary children to their advantage.
- Educators who are teachers of English (or vice versa!) need to know how to use what they know, for the benefit of the pre-primary children they are educating through English.

'[A child's] language learning skills are not isolated from the rest of his mental growth.'

Margaret Donaldson¹⁵

Our primary aim as teachers of English should be to support development in all areas – through English. In order to foster this stance of educating the whole child, it is useful to first get a better understanding of what three to six year olds are like.

- The three or four years of pre-primary education are usually seen as consecutively building on previous learning and – though the learning objectives will be similar – expectations in relation to outcomes are different, due to the specific needs of children at different ages and their cultural context.
- The difference between a three year old and a five year old is enormous and, as children develop at different rates, there will also be differences between children of the same age.

However, it is possible to outline what is typical in the key developmental stages of young children.

Key development areas

To help us see this a little more clearly, it is useful to think of the different areas of learning and development in children. We recognise the importance of taking each of these into consideration when teaching English to pre-primary children.

The Development Tables¹⁶ on pages 33–39 give detailed information about what the average child of three, four or five years old can do – in each of these areas.

Area 1: Personal, social and emotional development
This area contributes to ensuring that children are able to interact successfully with others and develop positive attitudes towards themselves and those around them.

Area 2: Communication, language and literacy
This area is essential for successful interaction with others, as – through acquiring language – children are able to articulate and respond to their own and other people's ideas, feelings and actions. The development of spoken language is the foundation of early literacy development, and thus, communication, language and literacy are seen as inter-related.

Area 3: Problem-solving, reasoning and numeracy
This area is about understanding numbers and counting as a base for calculation, as well as learning about shape, space and measure.

Knowledge in this area is used to solve problems, generate new questions, and make connections across all the areas.

Area 4: Knowledge and understanding of the world
This area relates to the children's own lives and experiences – their home and school, the local community and wider world. The children are encouraged to question, explore and discover all that is around them – through hands-on experiences.

Area 5: Physical development
This area relates to children's abilities to control their bodies, including the brain, muscles and senses.

Area 6: Creative development
This area reflects the importance of providing children with the opportunity to explore their world through all their senses. This also involves exploring different media and materials related to the visual arts, music, drama, and engaging in age-appropriate play activities.

3 The developing child

'The good performer should know not only his own science but also be able to give the details of the development of the child's or child's animal.'

Jean Piaget¹⁷

The most significant difference between pre-primary-aged children and other groups of language learners is that they are developing in all areas at an enormous rate: cognitively, physically, emotionally and socially, as well as linguistically.

This is evident if you look carefully at the progression of abilities in the development tables we referred to earlier. Knowledge of child growth and an understanding of how the developmental domains are inter-related are helpful in:

- guiding our expectations and those of parents;
- establishing learning goals as teachers.

They are, moreover:

- essential to maximising a child's learning experience.

In order to take a holistic approach to language teaching, we need to ensure language learning in pre-primary is embedded within context, age- and developmentally-appropriate experiences.

Key development theories

Childhood development theories from both developmental psychologists, such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner, and a multitude of educational thinkers – including Wilhelm Froebel, Rudolf Steiner, John Dewey, Erik Erikson and Maria Montessori – were instrumental in the organisation of ECEC.

With many pre-primary institutions referring to themselves as 'Montessori' or 'including Montessori programmes', many teachers

of English have no doubt heard of teacher and former scientist and medical scholar, Maria Montessori:

- Her legacy can be encountered in any ECEC setting through listing principles such as that 'children learn best by doing' and 'the importance of a child-centred environment'. It may be surprising, therefore, for teachers to learn that her ideas about child-sized chairs and promoting independence were once considered radical.
- Her research, however, is more than a blueprint for the design of programmes and spaces: it provided a foundation for the work and thought of both past and current educational theorists and thinkers who have been equally fundamental in shaping our views about how we educate and think about children.

With so many interrelated ideas and the multi-dimensionality of childhood development itself, it can be a daunting task for education to remember which theorist said what. However, if we want to take a whole-child approach to teaching English, we do need to understand some of the key theories: at minimum, the assumptions they make about children and learning, the principles derived from them, and the implications for our teaching practice.

Whilst it may be easier to talk about learners in terms of ages – eg, that a pre-primary learner is aged between three and six – it is sometimes more appropriate to think about children in terms of what they are developmentally able to do. Progress tends to follow the same order, despite children having their own developmental clock and reaching milestones at different rates – eg, a child may start walking as early as nine months, or as late as seventeen months, but they will always learn to stand first and, only after, run.

Stage Theory

Psychologists are still debating whether development occurs in pre-defined stages with recognisable features – referred to as 'stage theory' – or whether development is a gradual, cumulative process in which not all domains develop simultaneously. 'Stage Theory' remains a useful tool for helping teachers to understand the needs of their learners, particularly when they are to consider the immediately obvious implications of *pre-linguistic readiness*:

- For example, we can easily see physical development – when a baby develops the ability to sit. What is not so obvious, unless we are looking for an awareness of the signs, is if the baby knows what happens to their mouth during 'peek-a-boo'.
- Where does she get this generally by reading literature that a mother understands that it is not until her child develops something called *object permanence*, that the child begins to understand that the object is behind her hands – and has been there all along!

Stage Theory proposes that:

- Development occurs in distinct pre-determined stages.
- Progression through the stages follows the same order.

- Stages are characterised by typical behaviours and qualitative differences.
- Development is incremental, and builds on what came before.

Cognitive development

Piaget is often referred to as one of the 'fathers' of childhood development, particularly when discussing cognitive development and how children think and create knowledge. He introduced the idea of stages of intellectual growth according to his model, children from 18 months to six years fall into the 'pre-operational period' and, typically²⁴:

- form ideas based on their perceptions – eg, they believe that if they like something, everybody likes it;
- focus on one thing at a time, so struggle with multi-tasking – eg, listening and concentrating at the same time;
- over-generalise, based on limited experience of the world – eg, they have only met friendly dogs, so all dogs are friendly.

Piaget's operational stages have been criticised over the years, predominantly for underestimating a child's capabilities and not taking formal and social relationships into consideration, resulting in a definition of childhood, with teachers focusing on what *pre-primary learners cannot do* instead of what they *can do*.²⁵ For example, developmental psychologist Margaret Donaldson²⁶ argued that children in the 'pre-operational' stage are capable of deductive inferencing, and can also be taught thinking skills, given the right conditions and support.

A teacher who has an understanding of stages of child development is able to plan engaging sessions which fully maximise the child's experience, by ensuring that the *developmental demands* of tasks do not outweigh the *learning outcomes*:

- For example, planning for an activity which involves cutting around a detailed outline will be almost impossible for three year olds, challenging and frustrating for four year olds, and fairly difficult and time-consuming for most five year olds. (See more about 'realness' below, under 'Psychosocial development'.)

Cognitive development and language

Children tend to learn words in collections. They make 'thematic links', eg *hot-cold*, or *school-teacher*. That is to say, they may not yet make connections between words, and are less able to deal with abstract connections:

- Additionally, children *use* words long before they understand them²⁷, so – although a child might use the same word as an adult – it may carry a different meaning, related to their personal, more limited experience.
- As they experience the world, children's conceptual knowledge will grow, and so will their understanding of language and its significance – eg their ability to use synonyms or antonyms²⁸, like *big-enormous* or *high-low*.

Learning is optimised when children have the opportunity to build on what they already know and extend their interests. For example, when you introduce something new with something familiar in a context that is meaningful to the child:

- Introduce a new game with familiar and meaningful vocabulary.
- Introduce new vocabulary with a familiar and well-loved game.
- Use new language in a new but real context – eg clothing or weather items, when getting dressed to go outside to play.
- Introduce a new structure – eg 'Have you got a...?', with familiar vocabulary that is interesting to the child, like family or pets.

Children learn what is meaningful to them, and in ways that are meaningful. Furthermore, when it comes to language, it is not only more meaningful, but is acquired more easily, when the child hears the language whilst being physically involved in an activity²⁹.

The implications for your English sessions

- Ensure new words are presented in context, and are meaningful to the children and their lives.
- Introduce language in thematic units, to support connections.
- Ensure new vocabulary is presented with familiar chunks, and new chunks with familiar vocabulary.
- Expose children to communicative chunks of language in contexts that are meaningful to them.
- Use songs, rhymes and stories, for contextual support.

Psychosocial development

Erik Erikson's eight Stages of Psychosocial Development³⁰ are an important contribution to understanding pre-primary children. He explored the emotional and social dimensions of development. Erikson proposed that – as we move through life, from birth to old age – our encounters result in personality strengths and weaknesses, and that the resolution, or outcome, of each stage affects the next³¹.

The psychosocial skills relevant to teaching pre-primary learners are stages 2 and 3: *autonomy* and *initiative*.

Autonomy

Between two and three years old, the developmental task is to acquire autonomy and independence, without experiencing doubt or shame. Think of the feeling of independence and autonomy a child feels when they no longer need to wear a nappy – despite the occasional accidents, which could be seen as part of the developmental process – or when they are no longer ashamed of behaviour.

At around three years old, children become defiant, and we often refer to the 'terrible twos'. A child begins to develop their sense of self and a growing awareness. This stage is often marked by oscillations between wanting to be both *dependent* and *independent*: one minute a toddler, the next a defiant independent child.

Three year olds, in our experience, more often than not:

- like to be independent, but are still developing their autonomy;
- are less defiant than two year olds, but still need limits, realistic expectations and a sense of purpose;
- delight in choice;
- sometimes lack self-control.

Initiative

Between four and five years old, the developmental task is to acquire a sense of purpose, without guilt.

Accompanied by growing confidence in physical abilities, children in this stage are:

- ready to learn and take risks;
- increasingly capable, confident and self-aware;
- able to plan and complete tasks, when given support;
- able to learn from mistakes and forget failures;
- willing to listen to those around them, but would rather do than observe;
- often more confident than they are given credit for.

Erikson also believes in the importance of, and the role of, an adult in helping a child navigate their world (see also Sociocultural Theory) and that adults have the power to negatively or positively influence the outcome of each of these stages: by modelling certain behaviours – such as being over-controlling; by facilitating opportunities – such as offering manageable choices before this skill is developed.

The implications for your English sessions

Again, it is all about balance when applying theory to practice; however, the practical applications remain relevant, and suggestions for supporting Erikson's third stage – the development of 'initiative' – are summarised below³².

Teachers can do the following:

- Encourage independence, and aim to create opportunities for children to do things by themselves.
- Focus on gains, not mistakes, to support competence and foster a sense of purpose.
- Set expectations in line with individual abilities.
- Focus on real things and on doing things, with the aim of demonstrating children's competency.

Stage Theory summary

The main points to remember from Stage Theory are:

- Recognise that the child is still developing.
- Respect the need for age-appropriate methodologies, approaches, materials, tools and activities.
- Acknowledge that an understanding of child growth and development is essential to maximising the learning experiences for children and teaching the whole child.