

MORE THAN LITTLE PARROTS ... DEVELOPING YOUNG LEARNERS' SPEAKING SKILLS

Quotation from an interview with a 9-year-old learner of English as a foreign language:

I can see myself when I am older. And I am somewhere else, I mean, for example in London or somewhere. And I am older, and there are friends with me, but they don't understand me when I speak, I mean they don't speak German. I can see myself speaking English with them, and I feel like I am one of them.

Analysis of quotation:

- positive self image of being a successful future user of L2
- connotations of ease, fluency and security
- full 'ownership' of L2.

Perceived current good practice of teaching English to young learners often aims at 'pseudo-accuracy' (PPP model), in which students are able to:

- say or sing rhymes, songs and chants
- act out dialogues
- perform role plays and sketches
- retell stories.

A dilemma: children love imitating, but imitating does not automatically lead to the ability to communicate.

Communicating requires more than 'pseudo-accuracy', e.g.:

- Choice (conceptualisation)
- Self-monitoring (repair strategies)
- Using chunks of language
- Talk management (interaction, turn-taking ...)
- Fluency.

NB.: At A1 level, attaining accuracy is not a realistic teaching objective. We need to aim at **developing basic communicative skills**.

Fluency: We are fluent in a language when we

- are able to fill time with speech, and talk with a minimum of pauses
- are willing to speak, even if we think we may be 'wrong'
- are able to concentrate on the communication of our idea without spending time on planning and correcting utterances before speaking.

A possible new model:

From **PPP** (Presentation – Practice – Production)

to

IPA (Imitating - Practising control – Autonomy)

Imitating can be supported through multi-sensory activation (synesthesia) and helps the student to remember:

- Pronunciation / intonation / word and sentence stress
- Vocabulary & chunks of language
- Structures
- Discourse features / gambits.

'Practising control' in contrast to 'controlled practice' is about 'appropriation' of the target language

... learning a skill is not simply a behaviour (like practice) or a mental process (like restructuring) [...] Central to the notion of a transfer of control is the idea that aspects of the skill are appropriated. Appropriation has connotations of taking over the ownership of something, of 'making something one's own'. (Scott Thornbury, 2005)

Towards 'practising control' – suggestions for the classroom

- Adding challenges
- Shadowing & echoing
- Adding choice
- Games.

Towards language autonomy

A practical suggestion: **Say what you want** (Students are encouraged to express **themselves** in English)

Key teaching behaviour and attitude:

- Interest in the **content** of the student utterance
- Tolerance of errors
- Discreet error correction
- Skills to facilitate 'negotiating meaning'
- Patient support.

Background reading:

Murphey, Tim. **Language Hungry**. Innsbruck: Helbling Languages. 2006.

Thornbury, Scott. **How to Teach Speaking**, Harlow. Longman 2005.

Stevick, E.W. 1996 **Memory, Meaning and Method**, 2nd. Ed. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Practical examples taken from:

JOIN US, Cool English and Playway to English.

All three are multi-level courses for the teaching of English to young learners, published by Cambridge University Press 2006

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