

The Best Ways of Teaching English to Children: Using Children's Operas in Teaching to 5- to 6- Year-Old Children

Natalya Achkasova

High School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

This article invites teachers to consider how to strengthen links between English, music, arts, and acting, maximizing the potential for children to become successful language learners at a young age. It will show how children's opera can act as a catalyst for learning and using the language. The findings demonstrate that teaching English with a children's opera allows developing the basics of elementary communicative competence as it has everything that children of this age like rhythm, melody, story, and acting.

Keywords: children's opera, conscious learning, music, interactional context

Parents Want Their Children to Start English Early

It is a fact that the idea of teaching English to very young children is now attracting the attention of many teachers, linguists, and psychologists. Interest in this subject in Russia has developed over the last years from ad hoc, individual research efforts into the setting up of formal and professional research programmes. Today, children start English in the first grade (6-7 years old). Lyceums and gymnasiums run courses of English beginning at the age of five. In kindergartens, children are very often exposed to English from the age of three. Kids get easily involved in different activities and games, and ask to play them again and again. It is amazing how much easier they acquire new vocabulary compared to teenagers.

Why to Teach a FL (Foreign Language) Early

In spite of the fact that the history of successfully teaching young learners FLs dates back to late 1950s and early 1960s, the issue is still debated. Is it possible to teach young learners in a common public preschool and school to a level of language proficiency which will be higher than that reached by students starting in junior school? The experience of hundreds of schools which teach English starting from five to seven and also from 10 shows that by the end of secondary school, the former young learners can express more effectively, have more functional reading skills, are much more relaxed about mistakes they might make, and thus, communicate with foreigners without major problems. There were special tests conducted by language specialists of the Russian Academy of Education which prove that.

There are a number of reasons, named by the methodologists and ELT (English Language Teaching) practitioners, why to teach a FL at an early age.

That is the most favorable period for linguistic development (up to the age of eight). It can be used to form a solid basis for linguistic education.

An early start provides maximum learning time for English—the earlier you start, the more time you have to learn.

Biboletova and Trubaneva (2004, p. 2) said that, from an early age, children are exposed to the cultures of the countries where the target language is spoken, they grow up to be tolerant and sympathetic to other peoples.

Buzchinsky (1992), talking about the first steps of teaching English to children, spoke about phonological aspects of speech,

According to the data of psycholinguists, the first features to be acquired are those of intonation and rhythm. Thus, supposed the rhythm and intonation the child develops consciousness of meaningful chops of words and word combinations, forming mental images of this relevant pronunciation features. As for isolated sounds are concerned, the child forms their images later, in extensive practice of manipulation with the given sounds in various phonetic contexts. All that is what a natural top-down acquisition of pronunciation amounts to. (p. 67)

Lenskaya (1999) thought that,

One of the major reasons for young children being more successful than adults in learning a foreign language is that they are praised and positively reinforced more. It is easier for them to feel success as the amount of vocabulary they need to accumulate to be able to communicate with their peers is significantly smaller than adults would need for the same purpose. (p. 8)

Very Young Children? Let's Watch Them

Research shows that a 5-year-old child develops his/her sense of self through social rather than private activities—through a vast Web of interactions with his/her elders, his/her parents, teachers, and companions—the Web of interpersonal relations.

Most of activities of 5-year-old child are game-orientated. They play with dolls, dressing them, putting them to bed, and talking them. They like painting, drawing, cut-outting, and easily picking up with tunes and sing.

Children of 6-year-old continue to share the interests with children of 5-year-old, but acquire a greater intensity of feeling. The drawings are more realistic and more concrete. The boys and girls are keen on active cooperative games, such as hide-and-peek, ball games, blocks, wagons, bicycles, and soldiers. Mainly, children at this age like school and want to do “real work”.

Social and personal behaviors of 7-year-old show an increasing awareness of self and others. They especially like guns, funny books, and coloring. In general, they play similarly to children of 6-year-old, but display weaker propensity for pretending, demanding more realism. They are very self-conscious, which affects their behavior. Seven-year-old children can still engage in solitary play. They are fond of puzzles and table games. Eight-year-olds children, however, need another parson's rapt attention and involvement. They acquire a new sense of complexities of interaction, active relationships, and practical use. They dramatise everything: characters from books, movies, and cartoons.

Games for children are viewed as “the most admirable social institutions” (Jean Piaget), routed by which children come to terms with their social institutions.

Most Discussed Questions in Teaching FL to Children

The majority of children like school and are ready to do “something real”. An early start in teaching English is viewed as one of the means of fostering and enhancing language training. Furthermore, preschool

childhood is considered to be a favorable period for acquiring an FL. Before going any further, the author would like to identify some of the most discussed questions in teaching FL to very young children in Russia today:

- (1) When should teaching be started? And could it be harmful for the children's development?
- (2) What kind of motivation should teaching be based on?
- (3) Should learning be through unconscious imitation or conscious mastering of the language?
- (4) With such an early start, can the problem of continuity be solved?

Research

Research has identified the following views and approaches to teaching English to the very young in Russia today:

- (1) Effective learning of FL by preschool children can be achieved if we provide a conscious and purposeful system of forming FL skills (children at five are fully ready for conscious learning);
- (2) Learning should rely on the motivation of play, and all activities must be game-like activities;
- (3) The development of native language skills and FL skills in kindergarten occurs simultaneously;
- (4) The use of imagery (tales, stories, rhymes, and favorite characters) stimulates the acquisition of the FL by preschool children.

Practical Outcomes

Taking into consideration the approaches and strategies developed with young learners and relying on our personal experience with children, we came to some of our own conclusions. Effective teaching of the FL to the very young should be:

- (1) Conducted with varied activities, natural to the child: drawing, dancing, movement, listening to stories, drama, and modeling—all, in fact, means of communication;
- (2) Organized in accordance with the children's natural need for self-expression through music.

Music has been viewed by many authors as means of fostering personal, social, communicative, and linguistic competence at a preschool age. Research into the connections between the mechanisms of production and the perception of music and speech at this age shows that they are very similar. In watching children, we see that they naturally switch from singing to talking and back. They translate music into dance. They like experimenting with rhythm, tempo, and intonation in speech and music. Therefore, we are convinced that music should be the leading means in the exposure of children to FL.

Children's opera (a musical tale where story, dance, acting, singing and talking, drawing, and modeling all go together) is means of combining teaching with all the natural activities of the children. The result of our research can be presented as follows:

Children's opera: music + interactional context + combination of activities familiar to children from a very early age = successful learning.

Additionally, children's opera provides the interactional context that builds phonological awareness, necessary for the acquisition of pronunciation and speech. In the interactional context, speech functions become obvious. The approach is to use opera in both languages, first in Russian, and then in English. This immediately produces ideas and the concept of plot. Transferring into the FL will then occur with pleasure and without any difficulty. This approach first produces conditioned manner and behavior in the children's native language.

This manner and behavior are then easily transferable into the FL.

Children's opera includes drama and role-play. For every child, drama and role-play activities are vital in their development. Instinctively, they identify themselves with everything that happens around them. They have a natural tendency to express and organize new experience through muscular reactions. They react with their whole body.

Children of 5+ years old use body postures, gestures, and speeches to give expression to emotions and ideas, which are taking shape with them. It helps children relate others' experiences to their own lives. They assimilate their own thoughts and feelings and try them out in real world through drama and role-play. Mother tongue primary drama techniques are known to increase body and space awareness, language abilities, mimes, improvisations, and interpersonal relationships. Clearly, for children of 5+, dramatic self-activation is a method of learning.

Accordingly, the same drama games and techniques will definitely provide a child with a valuable life experience and good language practice in a necessary and entertaining way. Language as a communicative tool is clearer to a child.

In communicative teaching the language code, ability to communicate and comprehend with gestures, mime, or intonation, and desire to cooperate and interact are all essential components, and drama is a tool for acquiring for these elements.

Demonstration of the Approach

Usually, frequently occurring vocabulary is quickly learned by children, but it does not always matter whether they use it naturally and appropriately, as at this age, they are not very experienced in the acquisition and activation of new vocabulary in their native language. For example, if we take opera as a context, *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, there is a scene where Goldilocks meets and talks to the house. Using this approach, we should first explore the situation in Russian: What did Goldilocks tell the house? How did it greet her? What do people usually say when they meet? How do they move and look? The children would then act out the parts of the house and Machenka (the Russian Goldilocks), after which, they will be prepared to perceive the same situation in the new language. Music, with its emotional nature, makes exposure to a new language desirable, interesting and as we observed, easy for children. Movement, "decorations", and singing will serve as reference points, which make learning effective.

Using children's opera gives us the opportunity to teach communication from the very first class. A top-down perspective allows children to focus their attention on the interactional dynamics of the communication process. This approach allows us from the very first lesson to introduce authentic language in stretches of discourse. Characters from opera greet, request, agree, and question, which makes the new language natural and communicative from the very beginning.

Some Ideas About the Methodology

Music furthers the natural self-expression which makes the child move naturally while using the language. Thus, kinetics (or body language) goes together with speech and speech goes together with kinetics. Melody sets the tempo and aids fluency. This is what authentic language requires. Melody provides the keys for the children's self-control. Everyone has experienced this process: begin a melody and the words swim out from the memory. Consequently, when we ask the pupils to draw or model, we switch on the tape with the music

from the opera and children, of course, unconsciously repeat it.

Courses based on one children's opera over three months with two 45-minute classes a week give us the opportunity to introduce about 200 words and 50 functions, related to a child of preschool age (e.g., introducing, requesting, questioning, expressing joy, arguing, etc.). Such a course includes a learner-oriented syllabus (where students act instead of the characters doing so), making English words and sentences their own, which motivates them to continue their studies and provides them with an encouraging start.

The very young, especially, need to express themselves from the very first lesson: singing and speaking out, dancing and acting with decorations they have prepared. This is inspired by the magical force of music and the sound of a new language. In this way, the question of continuity in teaching communicative is resolved.

The Place for Games in Teaching of Children

Russian psychologists (e.g., Vygotsky, Zaporozets, Leontyev, and Elkonin) consider a game to be the leading activity of the age. Today, games are widely used in teaching FLs. In text-books and resource books, it is possible to find games of different types and categories, with the focus on oral or written language, pronunciation or grammar, loud or quiet, long or short, and team games or group games. And they are wonderful source if they are used appropriately in the teaching situation. The author will stress the following point here: In elementary teaching, games should not be an adjunct to teaching guided by the slogan, "When we have time, we will play". Games are the leading activity at that age that they cannot be something complementary to teaching, and they are the core of it. Every learning exercise, every item for practice with young children should be developed as a game. Games are governed by rules, which set up defined goals; games involve a contest (between players or between a player and the object), and they are engaging and fun. For example, let us imagine that we want children to be able to reproduce the words for vegetables they remember. It is not interesting and stimulating just to name them or identify pictures of them. It is different if the goal of the game is set up as: "Cook the best soup, choosing the ingredients you need. Everybody will be involved, even if the child voices the final recipe of their soup".

Another example is that we want children to distinguish between plural and singular forms, and ask them to jump up when calling out plural and to remain seated when pronouncing the singular forms. This can be a contest between two teams.

Priorities for the Very First Lesson With preschool Children

It is very important to establish priorities for the children for the very first lesson.

It is reasonable to have this expectation of speaking "fluently and correctly" at the beginning of the yearly language programme with young learners. They will have time for that. We probably would not focus on "Hello, my name is..." from the linguistic point of view at the first or second lesson, though very often today, it seems to take precedence over the value of providing a relaxed learning environment. For a child, a new language is not learning forms and vocabulary or greeting in a new way. It is a new game and a new experience. The priorities include:

- (1) Providing the motivation to learn English;
- (2) Building confidence;
- (3) Encouraging children to communicate with the help of any language they have (mime, gestures, etc.);
- (4) Giving a child an experience of a wide range of language in a nonthreatening environment;

(5) Showing that English is fun.

During the teacher training course, the author asked the participants to remember the phrase in Language 3 “Hello, my name is...”, and introduce themselves in front of the class. The results were not so great (sorry!). They repeated the sentence, but stated that they experienced much stress being a new learner. The results were different when they were asked not only to introduce themselves, imitating the new structure, but to invent the gestures, characterizing them, and getting the next person to copy it. The teachers stated that it was funny, not stressful and they even remembered the names of each other. Friendly and supportive atmosphere makes learning easier in any age group, but especially in a children’s group.

Drama-Like Activities for Children

Drama-like group formation activities are not merely ice-breakers, but they support each other to make physical contact or get confident. There is a difference between getting to know names and being able to risk speaking in front of the class.

Group formation activities may be:

- (1) “Broken telephone” (playing with a mime);
- (2) Listening to nice songs and dancing;
- (3) Children draw the characters from the first page of the course book and make a display;
- (4) Children act out the characters.

They can play hide and seek or do any other game or activity, such as provoking, acting together, making physical contact, or eye-contact. In this way, children will start learning in the environment which will:

- (1) Provide ideal context to introduce, recycle, and practice the language;
- (2) Produce maximum motivation;
- (3) Build positive attitudes;
- (4) Encourage active participation;
- (5) Provide joy and a feeling of success.

Experience shows that first lessons have a very strong effect on young learners, this is an early and important experience, which strengthens the children’s confidence in his/her own abilities in general and ability to learn a FL as well.

Conclusion

The author hopes that it is shown that teaching very young children is not solely a preparatory phase. It is rather an important process of immersing a child in the ocean of real speech. He/she will then be bathing with pleasure in the waves of melodies and rhythm and will float to the surface, purposefully and consciously, with the teacher, who enjoys the process as well!

References

- Biboletova, M., & Truvaneva, N. (2004). *Enjoy English* (Teacher’s Book). Moscow: Prosvechenie.
- Buzchinsky, V. (1992). *The methods of teaching pronunciation culture to children*. Moscow: Prosvechenie.
- Lenskaya, E. (1999). *How to teach how to teach young learners effectively*. Russia, Moscow: British Council.