

PATHWAYS TO TEACH EFL TO YOUNG LEARNERS

M. Teresa Fleta Guillén

The British Council School of Madrid
 tfleta@perlaunion.es

M. Teresa Fleta is a teacher and teacher trainer currently working in the module Teaching Young Learners of the MA "Teaching English as a Foreign Language" in the University of Alcalá de Henares. She has worked in the British Council School and she holds a PhD in Theoretical Linguistics and Language Acquisition.

Now that in many schools children start learning a foreign language early, particularly in schools with bilingual programmes, there is a necessity of effective methodologies that work with learners of that age. The goal of this article is to present teaching methodologies to help practitioners to teach English during the first years at school. Firstly, child second language acquisition is considered. Secondly, innovative pathways to teach English to young learners are presented. The last section looks at some pedagogical implications.

INTRODUCTION

Learning an L2 (the term L2 stands for non-native language, additional language and foreign language; L1 refers to the mother tongue) at an early age at school has become increasingly popular in many countries and in many schools, and studies on child L2 acquisition have contributed to this expansion. Linguistic studies suggest that when young learners are exposed to more than one language at an early age and within the adequate conditions of input and time, they develop the new grammatical systems in a natural manner, only by being exposed to the language.

The main aim of this paper is to give practical ideas to teachers and student teachers to facilitate the teaching task. In order to develop effective methodologies at school, one has to consider factors that influence learners in and outside the classroom, such as the learning context, the learners' age, the time of exposure to the L2 and the learner's needs during the early years. This paper is organized as follows: section 1 gives an overview of the manner in which young learners approach an L2 at school; section 2 looks at pathways to present English in the early years, and section 3 considers what

may be useful for practitioners. The Appendix includes activities and materials that can be used in the classroom.

YOUNG LEARNERS AND EFL

Children learn the mother tongue by being immersed in it, by interacting with adults and with other children; by analyzing the sounds, intonation, grammatical structures and by making sense of the language around them (O'Grady, 2005). Humans are potentially equipped to learn more than one language and studies on non-native language acquisition try to explain how a second language system is acquired and how two grammatical systems relate in the learner's mind. Under normal circumstances, children usually reach ultimate attainment of a mother tongue at the age of 5, effortlessly, with no instruction of the grammar rules and no matter the degree of intelligence; conversely, second language learners' results may vary considerably according to multiple factors. For many authors, age is an important factor influencing successful learning of an L2 and, as Lightbown and Spada (2006: 74) suggest, all things being equal, learners who are exposed to an L2 continuously during early childhood may become successful learners.

Although the acquisition process of an L2 is different from the L1 acquisition process, they have in common that they are both language systems and children who get in regular contact with two languages from birth, become simultaneous bilinguals or, as some authors call them, monolingual in two languages. Research findings show that in these cases, children develop the grammatical systems for both languages following developmental stages as if they were two mother tongues (de Houwer, 1990; Barreña 1997; Pérez Vidal, 1995, among others). When the acquisition of the L2 begins after the L1 process has already begun to develop (3,4,5 years of age), children can still reach a certain degree of bilingualism (Lakshmanan, 1995; Haznedar, 1997 y Lee, 2001, among others).

Another important factor concerning early L2 acquisition is exposure to the language, or what is the same, the amount of time young learners are in contact with the L2 which implicitly leads up to input and output opportunities and thus, to the quality and to the quantity of language input. In naturalistic contexts, children have more exposure to the L2 (Haznedar, 1997) than in a bilingual school (Fleta, 1999); and in a bilingual school children have more exposure to the L2 than in a school where English is taught as a subject lesson several times a week (Lázaro, 2002).

Summing up, there are evident differences between the L1 and the L2 acquisition processes, the developmental stages learners go through and the ultimate attainment. Nevertheless, research findings on early L2 acquisition suggest that childhood is a biological optimal moment for non-native language learning. Children at an early age are language receptive and when they are exposed to new linguistic data, they are able to extract and abstract the rules and restrictions of the grammatical systems around them using language learning strategies. As Halliwell (1992: 3) points out, it seems logical to think that at 3, 4, 5 or 6 years of age, children approach additional languages in an unconscious and natural manner and that they pay more attention to the message they want to convey than to the form: "Young learners do

not come to the language classroom learning empty-handed. They bring with them an already well-established set of instincts, skills and characteristics which will help them to learn another language. We need to identify those and make the most of them."

From the psycho-social point of view, children are optimal language learners because they use language learning strategies in a creative way and they relate well with others, even having little knowledge of the L2.

When studying L2 acquisition, there are individual and environmental factors to be considered during the learning process; there are factors directly related to the learners, such as aptitude, attitude, motivation or even the self-conscious feeling that prevents many adults from speaking foreign languages, and factors related to the learning context to which we will be referring to in the next section.

EFL AT SCHOOL

Nowadays, in many countries and in many schools, children start learning English early in a variety of ways. In early bilingual schools, content is taught through the means of the L1 and the L2, and children get instruction in both languages and develop the four skills (listening, understanding, speaking and reading) in the mother tongue and in the foreign language. Cross-curricular learning in two languages leads to a certain degree of bilingualism because pupils develop a specific language for the different learning areas.

In early bilingual schools, and also in schools where the L2 is taught as a subject during a few hours a week, the only linguistic model is the teacher and, as Moon (2000: 14) considers, the only source of language available:

The different contexts in which children can learn English affect the quality and quantity of language input which children get. In a foreign language situation, children will depend almost entirely on the school environment for input, so you as their teacher, may be the only source of language, which makes your role in children's language learning very important.

In this section we consider effective methodologies that create a rich linguistic environment and that help teachers and young learners at school. The main objective is to know more about how to present English to young learners during the first years at school, taking into consideration the learners' age, the learners' cognitive and linguistic development, the learners' knowledge of the world and the language learning environment; and bearing in mind that at an early age, children learn about the world at the same time as they acquire the language to define the world.

From this perspective, teaching English in English becomes an invaluable tool for communication and a vehicle that helps learners develop holistically, and by extrapolating aspects of the L1 language learning and by applying them into the L2 classroom we will provide learners a rich linguistic environment. The pathways presented here are thought out for all learners and for their different learning styles. As Gardner (1995: 208) points out: *"We are not all the same, we do not all have the same kinds of minds, and education works most effectively for most individuals if... human differences are taken seriously."*

For Gardner, each individual possesses different intelligences (linguistic, kinaesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, logical, musical, visual and naturalistic) and the learning environment influences their development. In what follows, therefore, the methodologies considered as pathways to teach English are thought out to take advantage of the school as a language learning context and also, of the time of exposure in the classroom (input and output opportunities).

Daily routines

Daily routines are excellent moments during the school day in which English can be introduced to the young learners. Routines are actions carried out regularly, every day or every week that contribute to language development. Routines orientate children in space and time and provide them with clues of meaning. Children are used to them in real life: cleaning the teeth, putting the pyjamas on and reading a story in bed indicate the children that it is time

to go to sleep. Cameron (2003: 10) considers that routines provide children multiple benefits: *"Routines can provide opportunities for meaningful language development; they allow the child to actively make sense of new language from familiar experience and provide a space for language growth. Routines will open many possibilities for developing language skills."*

Daily routines can help the teachers to organize the school day, in the same way as they help parents to organize the day at home. Daily routines provide predictability and help young learners to get acquainted with the learning context and to feel more secure in it. Children are inevitably immersed in daily routines at school when they get to or leave the school, at snack or at lunch time, tidying the classroom up, getting ready for a nap or going to wash their hands before meals, and the younger the learners, the more important routines are.

Sticking to routines daily helps children to know what comes next. Teachers can take advantage of the daily routines and the language that go with them and use them as pathways to teach English to young learners. Thus, a sequence of expressions such as "good morning", "come in", "take your coat off", "hang your coat on your peg", and "come and sit on the carpet", said every morning when children get to school, give them clues of meaning and helps learners to become familiarized with the situation.

Expressions used in the same context provide an opportunity for pupils to predict meaning and become the scaffolding on which children start building up the L2. The language embedded in the routines offers the possibility of variation and later on, it can become more complex and children can continue to make sense of it and start the process of internalization.

There are many moments along the school day which can be considered daily routines such as the session on the carpet to take the register first thing in the morning, to talk about the date, the weather or the birthdays; telling stories or putting the coats or getting ready to go home. During the birthday routine children listen to the same expressions and do the same actions every time there is a birthday: *it's birthday time*;

who's got a birthday today?; how old are you today?; sing the happy birthday song and clap hands according to the child's age.

In this manner, the daily routines, the repetition of the actions and the language that goes with the actions facilitate the comprehension and the language learning.

Summing up, daily routines facilitate language comprehension and interaction between teachers and learners at school (in the classroom, corridors, dining room, or playground) and language used at different moments during the school day in a systematic way becomes a pathway for interaction in the L2. Teachers can take advantage of daily routines and use them and the language that goes with them as pathways to teach English to young learners. Thus, repetition, daily routines and language patterns facilitate the exposure and the comprehension of the linguistic data first, and little by little, contribute to the growing of the L2 in children's minds.

Transitions

Transitional times are those moments in between activities, when an activity or routine is over and the next activity or routine is about to begin. Transitional times can be stressful, chaotic and frustrating moments in an L2, and also, in an L1 learning contexts. In this section we will show that transitions at school: going from the bus to the classroom and vice versa; from the carpet to the tables; from the classroom to the dining room, from the classroom to the toilet and even while waiting in a line for the delayed bus are ideal pathways for EFL teaching and learning.

The activities for transitions and the linguistic structures that go with them help teachers and learners in the same way as daily routines, and they can be planned together. Moreover, teachers can plan transition activities and include them in the lesson plans. Teachers can plan a rhyme, a chant, a song, an action or a poem to move children smoothly from one activity to another: for greetings and goodbyes; for gatherings and dismissals; for calling children's attention; for tidying up; for moving; for waiting or for slowing down.

Teachers can use verbal and non-verbal strategies to get young learners' attention. As Cameron points out (2003: 210), non-verbal signs, such as pictures, posters or notices are particularly important in this learning context because they anticipate learners explicitly that the activity is about to begin: *"Instructions can be supported with pictures relevant to key stages, left on the board or the wall in the right order to act as a reminder."*

The following sensory cues are thought out to get the attention of a group of learners, to avoid confusion between activities or during those moments in which the teacher needs to avoid misbehaviour in class:

- *Body language*
Non-verbal communication such as a hand gesture, eye contact or a facial expression can nonverbally give the children cues of meaning such as a beckon to come, finger to the lips for quiet, nodding your head for yes, and hand up for stop to move and to be quiet.
- *Musical resources*
When the learners hear ringing a bell, playing the drums, the tambourine, the triangle or clapping hands, they wait for instructions from the teacher.
- *Chants, songs and rhymes for transitions*
They can be traditional or made up: "From the carpet to the chair", "When I'm in class, I sit on the floor", "Get in line now", "Stay in line", "Picking up toys", "Washing hands".
- *Verbal reminders*
Teachers can give children warnings before transition times: "Five minutes before lunch", "It's almost time to tidy up", "If you can hear my voice, clap three times/stop what you are doing and look at me", "After we clean up, we are going to go for lunch".
- *Non-verbal cues*
Showing a picture of the next activity.
- *Attention getters*
Hand gestures facilitate meaning of linguistic structures and can be incorporated to daily routines and to transitional times. Some examples are "Clap your hands and wiggle your fingers", "Roly Poly up up up", "Hands on hands, fold your arms", "Statue of..."

Appendix I and II include mimic activities and chants which illustrate further what teachers can use during transitional times and daily routines. When children hear the first verse of the chant "Roly Poly" (Appendix I), they immediately stop what they are doing to copy the teacher and do the actions; and then, they are ready to follow the teachers' instructions.

The material included in Appendix II shows that there is a chant, a rhyme or a song for every moment of the school day. Teachers can decide on a language structure useful for the children and on a familiar melody and then, make up their own chants. In Appendix II there are chants that involve actions and that linking singing, routines and actions provide young learners with opportunities for comprehension and for language production: for moving, ("From the carpet to the chair", "Stay in line", and "Get in a line"); for tidying up ("We are going to tidy up"); for getting ready to listen to the teacher ("When I'm in class I sit on the floor") and for washing hands before snack or lunch time ("We are ready for lunch" and "This is the way we wash our hands").

Summing up, transitions and daily routines are invaluable learning times for teachers to present L2 in class and great opportunities for children to practice language at school.

Formulaic language

As we saw in the first section, young L2 learners before the age of 5 are still in the process of learning vocabulary and building up the grammar of the mother tongue by going through a process of developmental stages. During this time, formulaic language units, ready-made chunks and sequences of words, play an important role in both L1 and L2 language acquisition before or after the grammar internalization. Pre-fabricated language or formulaic language units are a type of linguistic input that can be presented to the young learners in class partly, because it has an important role in language development as the units are stored as wholes in long-term memory, and partly, because they provide children with the basic tools to communicate in the L2 and satisfy real social needs.

If daily routines and transitions are ideal times for the presentation of language to young learners, formulaic language is the type of language that facilitates the basic building blocks for early communication that can later be broken down and analysed for creative speech. For instance, a formula like "I'm sorry" can be expanded into "I'm very/awfully/terribly sorry about/to...", and this functional feature of expansion offers learners the possibility of using more complex language. Sequences of words and expressions that are used always for the same situations in class, such as routines and transitions, provide the learners with basic tools for communication and allow them to interact in the L2.

Authors consider that to use formulaic language units plays an important role in language acquisition and production because it allows learners to use the language, and it is by using the language that children learn how to speak. Learners can unpack the sequences of words, use parts of them, and combine them with other parts of the speech and produce new utterances (Myles, Mitchell and Hooper, 1999). As Moon (2000: 6) puts it, formulaic language provides learners with rich linguistic data that they can exploit:

Teaching children chunks may be very helpful in the early stages of language learning to enable them to take part in conversations. They can take over and use for themselves ready-made bits of language so that they can join in. By joining in, they get more exposure to input for language learning and more practice.

Teachers can help young learners from day one by providing them with linguistic tools of expressing their needs with imitation phrases seeking for a physical response ("more juice?"; "stop it"; "come here"; "don't shout"; "no pushing"; "whose is this?"; "where are you?") or magic words ("please" and "thank you"). Appendix III presents examples that illustrate communicative situations in which pre-fabricated language can be introduced in class (greetings, interruptions, making and responding to apologies, instructions).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

According to what we have seen above, the teachers are the only source of English in class and young learners need to make sense of what the teachers say; thus, teachers need to provide children with opportunities to hear and to use the language and they need to allow time for the learners to respond during interaction with adults and with peers. Teachers need to promote interaction and focus on the quality and the quantity of the input, on the input and the output opportunities, and on the interaction patterns; they need to provide young learners with activities which involve L2 utterances to a greater extent and to encourage children to use the L2; and more over, to produce extended utterances.

Daily routines and transition times are excellent opportunities to create a rich linguistic environment for young L2 learners at school and the visual and the auditory materials (cards, songs, rhymes, chants, stories, body language)

that go with them give learners *here and now* cues of meaning because the meaning is obvious and it is linked to the context. When the learners are young and during the early stages of L2 acquisition, they try to get meaning from the linguistic data around them, that's why routines and transition times; and formulaic and creative language provide them with the data they need for the construction of the L2 system.

At an early age, learners must have access to the grammars they are learning so that the grammars can grow in their brains. As the classroom becomes the type of setting in which L2 grows in children's minds and as young learners need plenty of opportunities to develop oral proficiency, teachers should plan activities that foster interaction from day one, from begin to finish and everywhere at school. On one hand, (nature) language learning strategies and on the other, (nurture) daily routines, transitions, and a repertoire of pre-fabricated language facilitate the acquisition of English at school.

REFERENCES

- Barreña, A. 1997. "Desarrollo diferenciado de sistemas gramaticales en un niño vasco-español bilingüe". *Contemporary Perspectives on the Acquisition of Spanish*. Eds. W. R. Glass and A. T. Pérez- Leroux. Somerville, MA: Cascadia Press & Pennsylvania State University. 55-74.
- Cameron, L. 2003. *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Fifth edition.
- De Houwer, A. 1990. *The Acquisition of Two Languages from Birth: A Case Study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fleta, T. 1999. *La adquisición del inglés no nativo por niños: el desarrollo de la cláusula*. Doctoral Dissertation. Madrid: Universidad Complutense.
- Gardner, H. 1995. *Reflections on Multiple Intelligences: Myths and Messages*. *Phi Delta Kappan* 77/3: 200-209.
- Haznedar, B. 1997. *Child Second Language Acquisition of English: A Longitudinal Case Study of a Turkish-Speaking Child*. Doctoral dissertation. University of Durham.
- Halliwell, S. 1992. *Teaching English in the Primary Classroom*. London: Longman.
- Lakshmanan, U. 1995. "Child second language acquisition of syntax". *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 17: 301-329.
- Lázaro, A. 2002. *La adquisición de la morfosintaxis del inglés por niños bilingües euskera-castellano: una perspectiva minimalista*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation. Vitoria University.
- Lee, E-J. 2001. "Interlanguage development by two Korean speakers of English with focus on temporality". *Language Learning* 54/4: 591-633.
- Lightbown P. M and N. Spada. 2006. *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Myles, F., R. Mitchel and J. Hooper. 1999. "Interrogative chunks in French L2: A basis for creative construction?". *Studies on Second Language Acquisition* 21: 49-80.
- Moon, J. 2000. *Children Learning English*. Oxford: Macmillan-Heinemann.
- O'Grady, W. 2005. *How Children Learn Language*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Pérez Vidal, C. 1995. *La adquisición del inglés de un niño bilingüe catalán/inglés*. Doctoral Dissertation. Barcelona: Universidad de Barcelona.

APPENDIX: TEACHER'S RESOURCES

I. Mimic for transitions

<p>Roly Poly Traditional Rhyme/Adapted</p> <p>Roly poly, roly poly, up, up, up. Roly poly, roly poly, down, down, down Roly poly, roly poly, give a little clap Roly poly, roly poly, put your hands upon your lap.</p>	<p>Activity: Roll your hands, reach up with your hands, clap your hands (change the word "up" for "clap"), and lay your hands in your lap – all while you recite the Roly Poly rhyme.</p> <p>Variations: Next, use a pair of rhythm sticks and do the same thing, this time tapping the sticks on the third line.</p> <p>Finally, start the rhyme slowly. Then speak it and do the actions a little faster. And then very quickly! Can you do Roly Poly with just thumbs? How about with feet?</p>
--	--

II. Chants for daily routines and transitions

From the carpet to the chair

(Melody: *She'll be coming round the mountain*)
Let's go from the carpet to the chair
Let's go from the carpet to the chair
Let's go from the carpet
go from the carpet
go from the carpet
to the chair.

We are going to tidy up

(Melody: *Mary had a Little Lamb*)
We are going to tidy up,
Tidy up, tidy up
We are going to tidy up
To keep our classroom clean

We all put our things away
Our things away, our things away
We all put our things away
And now our classroom is clean

When I'm in class I sit on the floor

(Melody: *Here we go round the Mulberry Bush*)
When I'm in class I sit on the floor, sit on the floor, sit on the floor,
When I'm in class I sit on the floor; I like to hear my teacher.

We're ready for lunch

We're ready for lunch (*clap, clap*)
We're ready for lunch (*clap, clap*)
Stand up (*clap*)
Stand up (*clap*)
Line up (*clap*)

Stay in line

(Melody: *London Bridge*)
Children, children stay in line
Stay in line, stay in line
Children, children, stay in line
Walk together.

Get in line now

(Melody: *La cucaracha*)
Get in a line now, get in a line now
We are going to go to class
Get in a line now, get in a line now
We are ready to have fun

This is the way we wash our hands*(Melody: Here we go round the Mulberry Bush)*

This is the way we wash our hands, wash our hands, wash our hands

This is the way we wash our hands before we drink our milk.

- before we eat our snack.

III. Formulaic language

Function	What you might say	
Greeting	Good morning (girls and boys)!	Good afternoon!
Introducing yourself	My name is.... What's your name?	
Living commands	Stand up!	Sit down!
	Switch on the light!	
	Close your eyes!	Ears open, lips closed
	Listen carefully!	Look at me!
	Listen to	Can you repeat/say that?
	Raise your hands!	Put up your hands!
	Do it like me!	Let's be quiet
	Hurry up!	Be quick!
	Be quiet!	Quiet, please!
	Watch out!	Be careful!
	Wait at the door!	Wait your turn/a minute
	Don't run (rush)!	What did you say?
	Walk slowly!	Say it again
	Stand up	Copy this
	Fold your arms.	Start here
	Hands up.	Time to stop
	Put it in the bin.	Collect crayons
	Put your chair under the table	Put it in the bin
	Line up/tidy up/ be quiet	Time to go home/for lunch/toile
	Sit down on the carpet/your chair	Draw around
	Colour the pictures	Listen again
	Say it again	Stop working
	Take your coats off	Pencils away

Living commands	Let's put things away	Put your work in your bags
	Stop and look....	Come here. Sit down.
	Please, wait	Wash your hands
	Close the door.	Show me...
Starting	Let's begin!	Let's say/sing it together
Stopping it	Stop it (that), please.	Don't do that!
Handing over something	Bring me the..., please!	Give me the..., please!
Opening / closing something	Open the door! Shut the window(s)!	Shut the door!
	Open your book!	
	Open your book at page...!	
Asking for the English word	In English, please, What's.... in English?	
Asking for repetition	Repeat (after me)! Say it again! Let's repeat! Again!	I don't understand Pardon Once more (again)!
Asking for understanding	Did you understand? Do you understand me?	Who's done...?
Suggesting something	Let's play a game!	