

DIFFICULTIES IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO YOUNG LEARNERS

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Keywords: young learners, language acquisition, emotional development, cognitive skills, teaching methods, challenges in language teaching, classroom problems

Annotation: This article explores the complex challenges teachers face when teaching foreign languages to young learners. It focuses on key issues such as cognitive limitations, emotional sensitivity, overuse of the native language, individual differences in learning styles, and limited exposure outside the classroom. The article emphasizes the importance of using age-appropriate, culturally relevant materials and fostering a supportive learning environment. It also discusses the role of parents and how their expectations can impact the learning process. Practical suggestions are provided to help teachers create more effective and engaging lessons for young language learners.

Teaching a foreign language to young learners is a delicate and complex task. Children aged between 4 and 12 are at a prime age for language acquisition, but their emotional, cognitive, and social development stages present various challenges. Teachers need to balance language input with engaging methods while also handling behavioral and developmental factors. This article explores several overlooked but critical difficulties in this process.

Cognitive Development Limitations

Young learners are still developing their abstract thinking abilities. Many concepts in foreign languages—such as verb tenses or grammar rules—can be too abstract for them to fully grasp. Teachers must simplify explanations and rely more on concrete examples, visuals, and real-life contexts, which requires careful lesson planning.

Emotional Sensitivity and Shyness

Children can be very sensitive to correction or failure. If they make a mistake and are corrected harshly, they might lose confidence and become afraid to speak. Some children are naturally shy, and speaking a foreign language in front of others increases their anxiety. Teachers must create a safe, encouraging environment where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process.

Over-Reliance on the Native Language

Some teachers or schools use the students' native language too often when teaching a foreign language. While this can be useful at early stages, it may limit exposure to the target language. Full immersion is ideal, but it can be difficult with limited time, resources, or teacher proficiency.

Individual Differences

Each child learns at a different pace. Some may pick up vocabulary quickly, while others struggle with pronunciation or sentence structure. Teachers must adapt their lessons to accommodate various learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), which can be hard in large or mixed-ability classes.

Limited Exposure and Practice Time

Young learners often have very little exposure to the foreign language outside the classroom. If they only hear and use the language for 30-40 minutes a few times a week, progress is slow. Without reinforcement at home or through media (e.g., cartoons, songs), they may forget what they've learned.

Parental Expectations and Pressure

Sometimes, parents expect fast results or fluent speaking after a short time of study. They may not understand the language learning process, especially for children. This pressure can affect the teacher's methods and the child's comfort with learning. Open communication between teachers and parents is essential to set realistic goals.

Lack of Culturally Relevant Materials

Cultural context is very important in language learning. However, many teaching materials are designed for native-speaking countries and may not be suitable for the students' environment. Teachers often have to adapt or create their own materials, which requires time and effort.

Conclusion: Teaching foreign languages to young learners is not just about vocabulary and grammar. It involves understanding the child's mind, behavior, emotions, and environment. Teachers must be flexible, creative, and patient to overcome the many challenges they face. With the right approach and support from parents and schools, young learners can develop a strong foundation in a foreign language that lasts a lifetime.

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