

## Problems and Challenges in Teaching English to Different Age Levels (Children- Young Adults- Adults)

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### **Abstract:**

Language is the most developed intellectual tool for communication between humans and human societies. Although you can also communicate with other tools such as signs, visual arts like painting and Sculpture, but trying to teach difficult concepts requires some complex methods; the most complete form is possible only through written and spoken language. This article, using Cambridge articles, library, archival and field research; tries to identify the problems concerning teaching the target language to the different age levels.

**Keywords:** Problems, Challenges, Teaching English, Age Levels

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## Introduction

Each individual person in a society speaks a different language, with different accent; languages that sound strange compared to each other. In recent years, learning English as a mean for communication, commerce and educational purposes is largely sought worldwide. Non-English-speaking countries, pay attention to their growing needs in establishing communication with others nations and in order to exchange scientific, economic, cultural, political, tourism, etc. information; they have chosen English as an international language and as their second language.

This is where the Educational Institutes come in, offering a wide range of unique teaching methods suitable for different situations, ages and solving problems regarding them. These problems and challenges are mostly visible in the matter of learners' age. Children, young adults and adults each face a unique problem that slows their learning progress. Which makes most of them to quit learning English as a second language; problems like inappropriate teaching methods, environmental problems, family issues and comprehension of contexts provided by the teacher and the books to the learners. To make this article more reliable, we did some field study<sup>1</sup> and did some experiments on some of the students, to better understand problems.

## Children

While it's no secret that teaching English to young learners is fun-filled and rewarding, there will be times when you find yourself dealing with challenges. For example, learners might start playing with their stuff, not paying attention, or talking to their classmates in the middle of the class. This doesn't mean that your classes won't run smoothly - you just need to be equipped with the right teaching techniques and tools! Let's take a look at some tips, tricks, and practical activities you can use to overcome the most common challenges when teaching youngsters in the English classroom.

As a new kid joins your English classroom. Chances are, they may have little or no knowledge of the English language and may resort to expressing themselves in their mother tongue throughout the whole class. Even if they have learned some English already, some students feel shy using the language in front of their peers. So, how can you maintain an English-speaking environment and encourage your young learners to speak in English?

Firstly, remember to make your learners feel welcome in your English class, regardless of their proficiency level. Keep a friendly atmosphere in your classroom, speak slowly and simply, and always smile!

## Some helpful activities to motivate the use of L2<sup>2</sup>

And, even if you don't speak your young learners' first language, there are many different ways they can learn from and understand you:

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<sup>1</sup> Shahid Zahedi school, Busher-Iran

<sup>2</sup> Dick, W., Carey, L., & Carey, J. O. (2005).

### **1. Use total physical response**

Use total physical response, which uses body language to help you teach. For example, you can put your finger on your lips to tell students to be quiet and listen; or point at students and raise your hand to tell them to stand up.

### **2. Elicit vocabulary with visuals**

You can use photos, flash cards, paintings and etc. to get your message to learners. Children usually pay more attention to visuals and teachers can use this opportunity to encourage them in participation and paying attention.

### **3. Enhance learning with music**

Teachers can use music, especially nursery rhymes, to make learning enjoyable.

Nearly all teachers can relate to having a student who gets bored after just a few minutes of working on an activity. Don't be alarmed! Children, in general, may struggle with focusing on a task for a long time. They start getting restless or lose interest in the class altogether, sometimes making it quite impossible to get anything done.

As challenging as it seems, you can make use of several strategies to bust your youngsters' boredom and boost their attention spans:

#### **1. Make sure you have a variety of games and hands-on tasks that you use anytime.**

Here are some activity ideas to get you started:

##### **1.1 Missing objects**

For this activity, you can tape several pictures of different objects onto a whiteboard. Make sure the students are familiar with the objects - you can initially elicit the name of each object. Then, tell the students to close their eyes and remove one picture. Afterward, have the students to open their eyes and ask them to find the missing picture.

##### **1.2 Picture hunt**

For this game, you'll need a photo of a place with many different things (e.g., a birthday party or a crowded park). You can tape this photo to your whiteboard so your students can look at them. Then, tell the students they'll need to find a specific object. For instance, you can say, "Look for the red baseball cap!" When students find the object, they can point to it.

#### **2. Keep your lessons simple and short**

If your activities are long, break them into chunks. If you're reading a storybook in class, you can divide it into sections or read two or three paragraphs each class. Before reading, pre-teach vocabulary - you can use flashcards for the nouns or a mime game for the verbs. Then, have students take turns reading the sentences in the book. You can follow the reading activity with reading comprehension games. For example, you can create multiple-choice questions and have students say their answers. If they answer correctly, you can draw stars on the whiteboard to show their points.

#### **3. Establish a routine**

If your students are already familiar with what to expect and what to do in each class, they will feel more secure and excited about what's in store for them. You can use a daily calendar that can be used at the beginning of every lesson to review basic concepts and establish routines.

From outside activities to inside distractions, kids are the most prone to get their attention lost while learning. Sometimes, you'll notice that they're not listening anymore because they're talking to each other, or if something grabs their attention from a book, they can just disappear from the class completely.

While you can't control the elements surrounding your young learners' environments, you can still curb potential distractions and increase productivity in a class by doing the following:

**1. Recommend to students' parents to familiarize their children with the class environment at home**

When kids study in a set learning space, they will identify it as a place where they must be in study mode. This place could be any quiet part of the house with minimal distractions and where your student can feel comfortable sitting down while studying.

**2. Reward learners**

Kids love winning, and when they know rewards are involved, they will keep their eyes on the prize. In English classes, you can reward students for winning games, for completing class activities, or even just for good behavior. You can also use visuals rewards to inform them of the number of points they've accumulated.

High-energy students can breathe a lot of life into their English classes. But, your lesson can be disrupted when they frequently start getting up from their seats to run around the room or play with any object they can find.

If you notice that your young students' learning is hampered because of their excessive energy and lack of self-control, you can deal with it with the right approach:

**3. Stay calm**

Kids naturally have high energy levels, but you don't always have to match them. Yes, keeping your cool to balance the tone of the class can be tricky at times. Nevertheless, the first step to this is not resorting to raising your voice. Many times, young learners have gotten restless and even started playing with their classmates. When this happens, teachers can start by calling the students by their name and politely asking them to play with the other kids after class.

**4. Channel students' energy into learning**

Instead of your students becoming overactive on their own, why not keep them excited about the games you've prepared for class? Firstly, you can prompt the student to return to their seat by announcing the next activity (i.e., "It's time for our next game!"). And, while you're at it, keep them focused and motivated by praising them for a job well done or, better yet, encourage them to shoot for the prize by letting them know of the reward they'll get when they finish a task.

As an ESL teacher for kids, you will find yourself in tricky situations from time to time. Nevertheless, it's possible to overcome these unique challenges.<sup>3</sup> By applying the tips above, you can be confident when handling different types of young learners, keeping them engaged, and even making a positive difference in their lives. As teachers, we know that learning never ends, and if you want to specialize in teaching or you want to brush up on your skills, explore Bridge's Specialized Certification in Teaching English to Young Learners!

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<sup>3</sup> Cameron, L. (2001)

## Young adults

Nunan (2010, p.7-12) suggests five main challenges that might be encountered by English teachers of young learners. Those challenges are in terms of cognitive development, motivation, attention, multi-level groups, and assessment.

### 1. Cognitive Development

The first challenge is cognitive development. Nunan explains that young learners are in the middle of their psychological and social development from infancy to adulthood. This kind of thing should be very considered by the teachers in designing the tasks and materials. He suggests that introducing the formal grammar and applying inductive teaching to young learner would not be a good decision. In contrast, they should create the tasks and materials which suit the students based on the stage they are at.

### 2. Motivation

Motivation is the second challenge that the English teachers of young learners perhaps face. It is explained that maintaining the students' motivation is crucial. Meanwhile, there are some factors which are able to influence the students' motivation.<sup>4</sup> Objective clarity and relevancy are the two of them. The students will be highly motivated once they know what they are expected to be able to do after learning certain materials as well as the things they could relate to the material are. Dick, Carey, and Carey (2005) reveal that by informing the students about the objectives of the instruction, it will help them both to use an effective learning strategy and to decide the relevancy of the instruction. Consequently, teachers have to be able to provide those two aspects in teaching young adults, including English.

### 3. Attention

The next challenge is to gain the students' attention. Getting the students attention is the first thing that the teachers should be able to do as young adults' attention period is limited. Sustaining the learners' attention during the instruction is very important that they are learning in order to perform it. In this case, teachers have to vary the activities in order to maintain the students' attention. Thus, including a variety of learning style into the activities are likely to be a wise decision. Another problem in teaching English to young adults is in terms of multi-level groups. Diversity in a group of students will lead to a serious problem. The diversity includes different motivation, different learning style, different first language, and especially different proficiency. Therefore, teachers must be able to deal with learners with those differences. To deal with the difference of proficiency level, they have to design materials and tasks which are varied in difficulty.

### 4. A student refuses to participate / do the task

This is a frequent problem that can have many different causes. In the first few lessons, this may simply be shyness, but it is important to identify the cause early on in order to devise an effective strategy. A few other causes might include:

- Lack of language required to respond or do the task

Provide differentiation tasks or scaffolding to help students with a lower level complete the task or have them respond in a non-oral way.

<sup>4</sup> Dick, W., Carey, L., & Carey, J. O. (2005)

- Low self-confidence in their ability to speak English

Again, differentiation and scaffolding can help here. Have students work in small groups or pairs first, before being asked to speak in front of the whole class.

- **Lack of interest or engagement in the topic**

If students aren't interested, they won't have anything to say. Adapt the topic or task, or just move on.

- External issues e.g., a bad day, a fight with a friend, physical problems (tiredness/hunger/thirst)

Talk to the student privately to find out if they are experiencing any problems. Allow them to "pass" on a task if necessary, and give them something less challenging to do.

### **5. Students are not listening / talking**

If you have a particularly noisy class, it can be difficult to get their attention. Set up a signal that you will use when you want them to pay attention to you. When they hear or see the signal, students should stop what they are doing and look at you. Some common signals are:

- Raising your hand

When students see you raise your hand, they should raise their hands and stop talking. Wait until everyone is sitting in silence with their hands raised. This works well with older children and teenagers.

- Call and response attention getters

These are short phrases that prompt students to respond in a certain way, e.g., "Teacher: 1 2 3, eyes on me!"

- Countdowns

Tell students what you want them to do and count backwards from ten to zero, e.g. "When I get to zero, I need you all to be quiet and look at me. 10, 9, 8 ..."

### **Adults**

Each learner has individual needs, and there are also more general factors to consider, like age. The challenges facing adult language learners can be (and often are) very different from those encountered by younger learners. Consequently, the challenges you face when teaching adults English will also be very different. From Skinner's behavioral model to Chomsky's theory of universal grammar, the process of exactly how humans acquire a language may remain a mystery for some time. But it's no mystery that you can't teach and interact with your adult students exactly the same as you would kids. Doing so would be less effective and, let's face it, probably annoying. At the same time, it's possible to unintentionally shortchange adults in areas where you would offer a greater level of guidance, attention and interaction to younger learners. So as teachers, how should we treat our adult learners? This question is a complex one, but it's worth asking, and there are some easy ways you can adapt your teaching methods<sup>5</sup> to help your adult students acquire English faster. 4 Challenges of Teaching English to Adults and How to Overcome Them:

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<sup>5</sup> Wickham, R. (2022)

### **1. The decreasing neuroplasticity of the adult brain**

Unfortunately, as we age, our brain plasticity (or the ability to form new neural pathways), does seem to decline. But does that mean, as adults, we should abandon all hope of mastering a new language?

On the contrary, researchers have found a strong correlation between bilingualism and the delaying of the onset of Alzheimer's. It appears that the challenge of language learning actually helps to keep our brains healthy, staving off dementia and prolonging our mental health. This is great news for both you and your students: Aside from purely practical advantages, language learning offers many intrinsic benefits. Surely this is reason enough to persevere despite the obstacles! Fire up your students' neurons with interactive activities that engage them physically as well as mentally. Don't underestimate the importance of fun in the adult classroom. Dialogues and role-plays are great ways to practice language patterns, simulate natural conversations and keep your class entertained. Just because adults will willingly sit quietly for longer periods of time doesn't mean they would prefer to.

### **2. Establishing mutual respect**

When teaching adults, it's extremely important to remember that our students are likely possessed of an array of skills and talents already, even if speaking perfect English isn't one of them. Over our lives, we develop a wide range of abilities, often to a very high level. Our adult students can be easily put off at the slightest hint of being patronized, especially if they cannot express this frustration in the new language they are studying.

### **3. Teaching pronunciation**

Younger children, especially those below around 7 to 8 years of age, often pick up languages with relative ease. Many attain a proficiency indistinguishable from a native speaker. However, this is not always possible for the adult learner. The dominance of the intonations, stresses and rhythms of our native language can be a tough barrier to break in acquiring full fluency in another language. Older learners may struggle with the idiosyncratic sounds of the target language. Making pronunciation a specific focus of your lessons can go a long way toward conquering these difficulties. If you're familiar with the phonology of your learner's mother tongue, it may be helpful to employ it to assist. But be careful it doesn't become a crutch that will hinder learning. Embarrassment is often a big hurdle to overcome here. Encouragement can help cultivate a positive attitude toward accuracy in pronunciation. Use of multimedia resources, including recordings of the student's own speech, can be a useful and engaging means of undertaking work in this area.

### **4. Adult learners have extensive demands on their time**

And don't we know it! From family commitments to pressing work deadlines. From social engagements to paying bills. For many of us, free time is one of our most prized possessions, and we value all our time highly. Recognize this in your interactions with your adult students. Make sure that as a teacher you are punctual and well-prepared. Keep your lessons moving at a good pace. If an adult learner feels their time is not being used effectively, resentment can ensue. And unhappy students are the most difficult to teach. Consider this when assigning homework. Is it possible to set tasks that can be easily woven into the fabric of a student's

day? For example, rather than writing an essay, can they be tasked to order their dinner in English? The key is to keep tasks meaningful and feasible.

### **Conclusion**

This article has attempted to illustrate the challenges faced by ESL teachers while teaching English to different age levels and methods to solve them to get a better result in the learning process. While it might seem that these challenges and problems can be fixed easily, a teacher might disagree. These problems, unimportant in appearance, if ignored can lead to catastrophic errors and fossilization of them. Therefore, it is crucial to pay attention to these problems and identify solutions.

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