

TO BE A SUCCESSFUL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNER; REFLECTING FROM CHILDREN

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Abstract: Learning a foreign language has haunted many adult learners since it is considered very difficult. Looking at the childhood period, everybody has been successfully through his first language learning process. Therefore, every foreign language learner can revival their childhood victory in learning language simply by recurring their strategies in learning a foreign language. This article offers a foreign language learner, in this case English, a strategy by imitating the way young children learn their first language.

Keywords: successful learner, a language learning, children

How to make every learner acquire a foreign language effectively and efficiently has become the linguists' concern for many decades. A wide range of methods have been formulated in order that the language learners become successful in their effort to learn a language. All methods, such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method, Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response (TPR), Community Language Learning (CLL), and Communicative Approach, are designed to assist every language learner acquire a language effectively. Yet, no methods claim that it is the best method and guarantee a one hundred percent success. It turns out that no method is superior to any other methods. Therefore, every method has its own strength and weaknesses.

From the perspective of the learners themselves, after making some interviews with the students in my classes, most of them admit that learning a foreign language, especially English, is not an easy matter. They find it difficult to learn English because of many reasons. Some state that vocabulary is the most difficult component to master. Other students mention grammar. The other students mention speaking and the rests state all English skills and components are difficult.

Looking back from the education policy in Indonesia, since 1994 through the 1994 curriculum English has been introduced at Elementary school as local load subject starting from their year 4 if it is deemed necessary, provided that qualified teachers, instructional materials, as well as other resources are available. (Suyanto, 1997 in Mistar 2005;74). Even today, English has been taught to the students of kindergarten and, much earlier, to the students of playgroup. With the assumption that most of my students have experienced learning English since their elementary level, surely they have no difficulties in

mastering English at least at intermediate level. As a matter of fact, the English mastery of university level students is still far from what we can say satisfactory.

Many questions emerge then. What's wrong with the way the students learn English? Or is there something wrong with the way teachers teach English? Or is there any other hidden factors contributing to the students' unsuccessfulness in their effort to learn English?

This article is not deemed to answer those tricky questions, rather gives alternative strategy to assist any learners, especially teenagers and adult learners, to learn a foreign language successfully by imitating the way young children learn their first language.

The reason is that everybody has been through his/her childhood period successfully. Ignoring their intellectual capacity, whether genius, superior, or normal, ignoring their sex, male or female, ignoring their family's economical status, as long as they do not suffer from brain or mental disorder, all people have been very successful in acquiring their first language. This fact tells that all people, without any exceptions, have great potential to learn other languages too. Therefore, recurring the way young children learn their first language in learning a foreign language can be a good selected method of a foreign language learning.

THE CONTRA

Not all language teachers agree with the idea that adult learners may take some benefit from the way children learn language. Bolton (2009:63) that the way children learn their first language may not work to adults for two reasons below:

First, adult's brains do not work exactly like those of children. Children are more open than adults. Their minds are much more receptive for all they encounter. Also, they are relatively unfettered by inhibitions. Many adults, for example, are afraid to trying to speak in a foreign language, for fear of sounding ridiculous. Children, on the other hand, are seldom so inhabited: they simply speak out, and if it is not quite right, they probably even do not realize it and do not care much anyway.

Second, the advantage which the adult has over the child is the fact that s/he has developed a superior capacity to reason, as well as to analyze. When adults try to learn a language the way children do – by simply seeing, hearing, and repeating, with no attempt to analyze why things are said in certain ways – they rob themselves of the chance to use one of their main strengths, that is, to logically sort out how the language is structured, how the rules of grammar are applied, the precise differences between the target language and their native language.

FACTORS AFFECTING THE LEARNING SUCCESS

According to Steinberg, Nagata, and Aline (2001:170-177) there are two main factors affecting the learners' success, both children and adults, in learning a second/foreign language. They are the psychological and the social factors. The

psychological factors include intellectual, memory, and motor skills. Further, the social factors include the natural, and the classroom situation.

The intellectual capacity of learners affects their ability in understanding the structures or the grammar ruled on a foreign language. Grammar can be taught through explication and induction. Explication is the process whereby the rules and the structures of a foreign language are explained to the learner. This explanation is given in the learner's first language. The learner is then expected to understand, learn, apply, the rule in the foreign language.

On the contrary, learning rules by self-discovery is the essence of induction. The learner who is exposed to the foreign language speech will be able to analyze and discover the generalization or rule that underlie that speech. Actually, not only must the learner devise the rule based on the speech that s/he has heard, but s/he must figure out how those rules are to be applied in other cases.

The next factor influenced is memory. For adults, memory seems to begin its decline around the age of puberty (Lenneberg, 1967). Since adults continue to engage in higher thinking and analysis, there is little reason to believe that they would not be able to analyze syntactic structures. Steinberg, Nagata, and Aline (2001:175) believe that the decline in memory ability is the more likely hypothesis. In conclusion, although adults are assumed to undergo the memory decline, they will not find it difficult to analyze and understand the rules governing sentences.

The motor skills are dealing with the articulators of speech. These include the mouth, lips, tongue, vocal cords, etc., all of which are controlled by muscles which are controlled by muscles which are under the general control of the brain (Steinberg, Nagata, and Aline, 2001:175). Adults around the age of 12 years old or so, there is a general change throughout their body that affect their motor skills, undeniably their articulation of speech.

THE CHARACTERISTICS BENEFITED FROM CHILDREN

In the following it is presented some characteristics of young children in relation to language learning which are, some of them, developed from Scott and Ytreberg (1995;2-5). These characteristics may also benefit older learners if they are willing to imitate.

Enthusiastic and Positive about Learning

Young children are enthusiastic and positive about learning. One positive attitude shown by children is that they are always happy and make themselves happy with the learning process. They will find any activities to make themselves enjoy the situation. Besides, children are very open to something new. No prejudice is made when they start to learn something new and when they try to make friends. This attitude helps them learn something new faster. That is why it is important to praise them if they are to keep their enthusiasm and feel successful from the beginning. If they are labeled failure, then they believe it.

Adult learners need to possess such attitude if they want to be more successful in their learning. Adult learners know better how to arise their enthusiasm toward learning. They can select certain methods, materials, learning partners, which learning media are fit to themselves. Even adult learners may be able to manipulate their mood in order that they are able to keep learning enthusiastically.

Negative prejudice may prevent learners from being successful in learning. Negative pre-assumption that English is difficult, that it may spoil their own culture because it introduces bad culture from the western, and that it is the language of colonial, can lead to the failure of learning. Thinking that English is difficult, for example, will decrease motivation to learn seriously. Therefore, to be successful, every learner should have positive perspective toward English and learning itself. Learners should be more open to something new they going to learn, and believe that it will give benefit to them.

Asking questions all the time

One of the prominent characteristics of children is that they ask questions all the time. Asking questions is the way they satisfy their curiosity and enrich their schemata, vocabularies, and new experience. Asking questions also indicates that they have greater interest and motivation to get improved. Besides, the criticalness is also shown from how frequent the learners propose questions. In this case children are very critical.

In learning a foreign language, adult learners should also be active and critical as young children. Asking questions constitutes a complex speaking skill. It means that to be able to ask questions, there many factors involved. Renkema (1993:33) explains that in the general communication model, someone who are initiating a communication by asking a question, for example, experiences what is called coding process. Before producing the spoken utterance, the speaker selects the message he is going to deliver in the information center in his brain. The message can consist of words or vocabulary, image, or music. The transmitter then codes the message in a signal or language form that is sent through the channel to the receiver or listener.

From the explanation above it is clear that making a question is not a passive state, but a productive process. In the process of message selection, the speaker selects and sorts what message he is going to deliver, finds the correct and appropriate terms or vocabularies, and decides how and what medium to speak his ideas.

Being able to work with others and learn from others

It is clearly notable that children are able to cooperate with other children. They easily adapt themselves to new situation and friends, and quickly recover from any conflict with their friends. In other words, children are more open to differences and partners.

Since the main objective of learning a language is to conduct a communication, the teaching learning process must be conducted cooperatively. The language learning must be designed to involve at least two people. Such kinds, learning design, therefore, need state of willingness to work together with

other people, tolerate the differences existing between them, and learn from and share with other people.

In this case, being open, like children are, is a prerequisite. Therefore, adult learners need to open themselves, get rid of any prejudice toward not only the language they are learning, but also the people speaking that language and the partners with whom they learning the language. It is wide-commonly believed that extrovert people are more successful in learning the foreign language than the introvert ones.

Learning by Imitating

The way children learn their mother tongue, as what it can be observed, is by imitating. By imitation means that children copy and repeat aloud the words which they hear. Through imitation, children learn how to pronounce sounds and words they seem to enjoy imitating the sounds which they hear (Masur, 1995).

Adults may also benefit from imitation. In learning writing for example, imitation can be applied. The writing procedure, first, is by looking at a good model of the text which has been selected before in accordance to the genre of the text which is going to be taught. Then, the learner study how the structure of the model text is, how main ideas are stated, how the coherence is vividly expressed, and how the supporting details are developed in each paragraph.

From the study of the model text, then, the learners may imitate the way the writer of the model text develop his ideas, formulate the main ideas or thesis statement, present the supporting detail, and make the writing coherent and unity. Surely, it is assumed to be much easier in learning how to write a text or composition well.

CONCLUSION

Although there is a doubt, even a contra opinion, that adults may benefit from the way children learn their first language for some reason, but I believe that there are some common conditions or characteristics both children and adults share in learning language. Therefore, it can be synthesized that the way children learn can be used as an advantageous inspiration for adults to improve themselves in learning a foreign language.

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