TEACHING LANGUAGES TO YOUNG LEARNERS THROUGH SONGS AND STORIES

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Abstract: Language teaching to young learners has always been an area of interest for educators and researchers who seek to identify the most effective and age-appropriate instructional methods. Young learners, usually defined as children aged between four and ten, possess unique cognitive, emotional, and linguistic characteristics that require creative and engaging pedagogical techniques. Traditional grammar-focused methods often fail to capture their attention or stimulate meaningful learning. Therefore, educators increasingly emphasize the use of songs and stories as tools for language instruction. These two methods offer an enjoyable and natural way of acquiring linguistic knowledge through exposure, repetition,

and meaningful context. This article discusses two major aspects: the role of songs and the role of stories in teaching languages to young learners, illustrating how each contributes to vocabulary acquisition, pronunciation development, and motivation.

Keywords: young learners, songs, TPR, effective storytelling, illustrating, linguistic, knowledge.

The role of songs in language learning: Songs have long been considered one of the most powerful tools for language teaching because they combine linguistic input with music, rhythm, and movement. According to Coyle and Gómez Gracia (2014), songs help young learners retain new words and expressions through repetition and melody. Unlike traditional drills, songs introduce vocabulary and grammar patterns in a memorable and emotionally engaging way. The repetitive structure of songs enhances both short-term and long-term memory retention, allowing children to internalize linguistic forms without conscious effort.

Moreover, songs are effective in developing pronunciation and listening comprehension. The rhythm and intonation patterns in songs mirror natural speech, helping learners grasp the prosody and stress patterns of the target language. For example, teaching children the song 'Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes' not only introduces vocabulary related to body parts but also helps them internalize rhythm and syllable stress. The act of singing along improves fluency, as children subconsciously mimic native-like pronunciation.

Songs also play an essential role in reducing anxiety and increasing motivation in the classroom. As Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) suggests, learners acquire language more efficiently when they are relaxed and motivated. Singing provides a joyful, low-pressure environment that encourages participation. Even shy or less confident learners tend to join in group singing activities, which enhances their sense of belonging and linguistic confidence. Furthermore, songs expose children to cultural elements of the target language. For instance, traditional English songs such as "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" or "London Bridge is Falling Down" offer insights into Western culture and customs, thereby broadening students' intercultural awareness.

In practical classroom settings, teachers can use songs in various ways. One effective method is the 'Listen and Do' approach, where learners perform actions related to the lyrics-similar to Total Physical Response (TPR). For example, when singing 'If You're Happy and You Know It,' students clap, stomp, or nod according to the words, reinforcing meaning through physical movement. Another strategy involves fill-in-the-blank lyric exercises, where teachers remove key words and ask students to listen carefully and complete them. This improves both listening accuracy and vocabulary recall. Teachers can also integrate songs into thematic lessons; for instance, a song about weather can accompany a unit on seasons and clothing, creating strong conceptual connections.

Teaching young learners a foreign language requires creative and engaging methods that suit their developmental stage. Among the most effective techniques are songs and stories, which combine entertainment with language input. Both methods are based on the idea that learning is more effective when it is enjoyable and meaningful (Cameron, 2001).

Stories are equally significant in the language classroom, serving as a bridge between linguistic learning and cognitive development. Storytelling allows learners to encounter vocabulary and grammatical structures in meaningful, contextualized situations. According to Albaladejo, Coyle, and Roca de Larios (2018), preschool learners exposed to stories demonstrated higher levels of vocabulary recognition compared to those who learned words through isolated drills. This indicates that stories enable children to link words to events, emotions, and characters, which aids in deeper understanding and retention.

From a cognitive perspective, stories stimulate imagination and critical thinking. As children follow a narrative, they learn to predict events, infer meanings, and understand cause-and-effect relationships-all of which are crucial cognitive skills. Linguistically, storytelling introduces discourse markers, connectors, and complex sentence structures naturally. For instance, while reading 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears,' children are exposed to sequencing words such as 'first,' 'then,' and 'finally,' as well as adjectives describing size, quantity, and emotion.

In conclusion, both songs and stories are indispensable tools for teaching languages to young learners. They transform language learning from a mechanical process into a meaningful, enjoyable, and emotionally rich experience. Songs enhance memory, pronunciation, and motivation through rhythm and melody, while stories foster comprehension, imagination, and emotional engagement. Together, they form a balanced approach that supports not only linguistic development but also cultural and cognitive growth. As research shows, students exposed to songs and stories achieve greater vocabulary retention and demonstrate more positive attitudes toward language learning.

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