Teachers for the Knowledge Society

A multiple intelligences approach: intuitive English learning – a case study for k-1 students

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Abstract

Our paper presents a case study for kindergarten and primary students who learn English as a foreign language, following their progress when they rediscovered their world and renamed it intuitively in the target language. We use interactive multiple intelligences tasks that support the young learners to improve their awareness of the language system of regularities and their basic communication abilities. The research consists in implementing school games that highlight the abstract and concrete concepts that are at hand in the youngsters’ environment. We also consider that intuitive techniques can support effective internalization of the concepts and in-depth learning.

Keywords: multiple intelligences; intuitive learning; interactive methodology; in-depth learning; school games

1. Introduction

Traditional English lessons did not allow games, songs and poems. They were permitted only at the end of the lessons and not every time. They were like a dessert that came along with students diligently to fulfill the tasks required.

Modern methods and in particular Multiple Intelligences Theory, bring these desserts in the current activities, which are used to facilitate learning anytime. The literature provides theoretical and practical information in support of these modern methods and regarding the manner in which a child assimilates new knowledge from the environment through active and intuitive teaching methods. We felt that it is necessary to do a research that regards children groups who were not yet accustomed to traditional teaching methods, as the children are at the beginning of their English study. The design of our research was inspired by a variety of studies that focus on language and the human mind in a broad sense (Chomsky, 2006), children’s acquisition of language (Karmiloff-Smith, 1981) and mainly on the intuitive acquisition of language in young learners (Karmiloff, Karmiloff-Smith, 2002) as well as on the research in multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2004, 2006). The latter was particularly inspirational for adapting interactive methodology suitable for k-1 English learning to the variety of intelligences profiles of our children.

The hypothesis that we support is that “if we use the intuitive teaching, then the students will acquire knowledge of foreign language without effort”. Our target groups are children of kindergarten and primary school (first graders). We present below the research by means of two case studies according to the target groups.

2. Case study and experimental results – kindergarten

Following the experience gained during the activities with very young students we observed a tendency of receptivity increase in those classes in which students used the environment correlation when being taught a new language. Children at this age cannot absorb knowledge through reading or writing, primarily because they do not
have these skills yet, and secondly because the need for movement and play is much more pronounced than patience and concentration.

Kindergarten children learn from their environment, they develop a sense of space and time and they are able to undertake connections between concepts and objects around them. So practice and repetition provide recognition and use of at least 50 new words in a month’s time, in new contexts and in their own phrases.

Games, songs and movement activities were the main focus of the research, although the background was focused on children’s accumulation of new knowledge in English. Research on preschool children group took place during two months of study. The available time was 1 hour per week. The children, in a total number of 60 students, were divided into two groups: those who had first contact with English and those who had studied English a year before.

Since the beginning of the study, the children were involved in presentation activities, as well as in the departure ones. Bruner (1983) claims that teachers must engage in a "struggle against passivity". Thus we chose as a landmark for the beginning and end of each lesson, two suggestive songs, titled "Hello" and "Goodbye." These songs have allowed the children to enter the English lesson environment and were a "signal" that the English time either started or ended. The songs proved to be very alluring and exciting, because through their simple and entertaining lyrics, they offered the children freedom of movement, and gave them the opportunity to use hands and face expressions. Thus, we aimed the understanding of greetings expressions in new contexts, through verbal repetition, mixed with suitable gestures and movements (meeting with parents at the end of the day, separation from mates).

During the study, we used a mascot, personified in the role of a friend and instructor of the children's movement. This doll, named Bob, asks the children to perform certain actions such as "sit down", "dance", "jump", "stand up", "close the door, open the door". Knowing that Bob is a true friend and a very funny person, who just wants to play, repeated tasks application, at least 3-4 times during a course didn’t bother the kids. They were very amused and happy to do what Bob performed. Also, through repetition and association with various movements and actions, the acquisition of new linguistic elements was made effortlessly. Bob is the one who teaches them songs and poems using the CD, because he knows them very well as he practices them at home.

Another phase of the research was the introduction of some suggestive big and very big posters. These contained colours, numbers and animals. The new elements were accumulated using posters in various contests and games. These were mixed on the floor, and at Bob’s commands children were asked to sit on the right image. If the image contained an animal, the child had to mimic the animal’s sound. If they were wrong, they were asked to wait on the red chair, which was called the “Stop Chair”.

The next interactive activity, on which the teacher followed recognizing colours, consists in gathering all the coloured chairs in the middle of the room. The children had to dance around them, and when Bob told them a colour in English, they had to sit quickly on them. The rule was not to sit on the mentioned colour. Thus if a child is left standing or he/ she sat on the wrong colour he has to be removed from the game. This game aimed at the recognition of colours.

After these activities we needed to analyze students’ progress in order to draw conclusions. As the children are unable to read and write, progress could be verified only through systematic observation or other games with the same themes. Games are activities where children participate in a natural way, and they contribute in a friendly way to testing things that children should know or for the strengthening of certain skills. The systematic observation was made through watching the children’s attitude and their answers to Bob, to other mates, to parents and to other teachers. So we prepared a chart that allows data collection in terms of student progress.

At the end of this research period we can also speak about results. Although at the beginning songs seemed difficult because they were in English, on the way, the children perceived this activity as relevant and fun. This was challenging because all children love to imitate and mimic, and the repetitions gave them a sense of security and fulfillment. They managed to associate gestures and forms of greeting with the right situations, and approximately 70% of students gained a very good score in the systematic observation, being able to use concepts learned in their own contexts.

When learning a foreign language, children can understand more than they can say.

Most times, they can express what they understand through movement. Bob’s activities allowed the children to focus on what they were listening to and demonstrate that they understand without having to formulate a response. These games have helped in the development of listening and speaking skills. Thus, it was found that 90% of students were able to understand and react to 10 common commands in English.

Contests based on different systems of reward were effective in the acquisition and use of concepts from the environment due to competitiveness. All the children wanted to know and understand the concepts used in the game.
problem for at least 90% of the students, and the analogy with the sounds of each studied animal had a high efficiency.

![Figure 1. Children’s evolution](image)

According to the systematic observation, a graphic organizer was obtained (Fig. 1). It shows the evolution of the children. Thus, in the first two weeks the evolution was not very obvious because they were still undergoing adjustment. Towards the middle of the study, after a significant evolution, regression was observed in remembering the knowledge acquired in earlier weeks. After a brief recap, the students succeeded in having a very good yield in the last two weeks of the research.

3. Case study and experimental results – first grade

Recent research has shown that children learn a language by using language. They do not learn it and then use it! Furthermore, we know that repetition is essential for consolidating language learning. A similar program was used for first graders, also. They were introduced to the new language by Freddie, an English speaking frog. This frog became their teacher and is the one who delivers information, concepts and commands. The frame is a story of Freddie and some of his friends. By dividing this story, a set of mini-stories were produced and they came to be the “Intuitive English Teaching Program”. The lessons focus was not on vocabulary, but on the main structures that the students may acquire such as It’s a (pencil). (recognition) What colour is your (schoolbag)? My (schoolbag) is (red). (recognition) Where’s (Freddie)? He/She’s (big). He/She isn’t (fast) and on functional language such as Come on! Hurry up! I can’t wait! It’s late. You’re too slow.

The main ideas around which teaching in such a manner was developed are the following:

- Children’s learning develops with active involvement. Children learn by doing.
- Children use language to structure their concepts. Language comes first.
- Learning environments need to be language rich.
- Children’s development is not limited to language and concepts. They also develop as learners.

This fourth idea sustains the importance of creating learners, not students able only to reproduce a known fact. As children develop as learners, they need to extend their language experience outside the controlled environment of the story. We also need to prepare the children for a more formal study of the language and its contents in order to meet later challenges. As the children develop as learners, both in their command of language and in the underlying concepts, the story presented becomes a kind of package for other questions. For example, a story about nature leads us to examine the importance of respecting and protecting our natural environment. Once the children are ready to engage in these issues they will work with the stories in a different way. Each mini-story illustrates a specific topic with its particular language register and knowledge content.
In the early stages the children’s capacity to produce language is clearly very limited. We can support this process of learning by providing activities with simple repetitive lines of the story in each lesson. Another way in which the children are encouraged to produce language is through songs, rhymes and tongue twisters. Songs play an important part in the language classroom as they provide an opportunity for children to articulate the new language within a melodic framework. For the teacher, songs are a means of checking comprehension through physical response and for eliciting choral production of new language. For the children, songs are motivating and enjoyable. Songs are used for language presentation and give students a real reason for listening to a list of new words or a repeated structure. The pronunciation model for the new language is contained in the song lyrics and the melody and the rhythm help the students to memorise the new language. A song can be sung many times and it provides a vehicle for reviewing language. This is possible due to the number of students in a group: 16-18 children.

![Language acquisition graph](image)

Figure 2. Language acquisition

Young learners respond positively to routine and predictable sequences of events. At the start of each lesson the children will say a short warm up rhyme and at the end of each lesson they will say a short goodbye rhyme. The purpose of this is to mark a clear beginning and end to each lesson. This is for the purposes of classroom management: to signal to the children that the English lesson has started and they need to change their language of communication; to provide repetitive structures for greeting and saying goodbye to each other.

Through the work the children do with the stories they will develop the kind of literacy skills which will support their language learning, such as: sequencing, predicting, drawing conclusions, observing character development and so on. These skills are essential for developing the language competence that we are aiming for. Furthermore, they are essential if the children are to eventually reach an acceptable standard of written English.

They start to do this with simple activities such as tracing over words, completing words, choosing words to complete sentences and so on.

Initially the children’s capacity to use English is practically nonexistent. They will use the mother tongue when talking to the teacher or to their peers because they cannot do otherwise. However, the teacher should speak back to them in English choosing words carefully and clarifying with mime, gestures and facial expressions. Gradually the teacher should encourage them to use more and more English.
For many children – over more than 40 out of the total number of 85 students –, their only exposure to English is in the classroom with their teachers. We know that language learning requires a lot of exposure and practice and this is why it is suggested to view all the situations in the classroom as potential learning situations and take maximum advantage of the time the children are present.

There are clearly some occasions when it is not efficient to use English and the teacher should revert to the mother tongue, specifically when they are dealing with a conflict or a child is distressed. Even so, these opportunities should be taken to assure the children they could express their emotions in English, too. By doing so, the environment is secure and it assorts a certain type of interaction. Moreover, the child will understand that it is also very good to speak a second language and they will also be provided with the environment in which they could do so.

4. Conclusions

The present research has shown that so far our hypothesis has not been denied! The language acquisition is of 50 or more words in a month’s time. These words are not just label words as they are used in different main structures or/and to construct a functional language.

In addition, there were no limitations to the present research, the results obtained having been unaltered during the whole period of the study.

The two groups that were involved have shown that a variety of verbal and non-verbal tasks does help the students in acquiring a new language, focusing on implementing the main structures of the functional language. The dynamics of the game-like activities as well as the wide range of – mainly - visual, kinesthetic, interpersonal and musical entry points or representations allowed young students to enjoy effortless activities that motivated their learning. This intuitive form of language acquisition proved to be a success in both groups, despite the minimal setbacks that occasionally appeared.

Figure 3. 1st grade class

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