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Creating a Student-Centered and Effective English Language Learning Environment: The Role of Consistency, Engagement, and Individualization in Early Education

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Abstract

This article explores effective strategies for teaching English to young learners, emphasizing the importance of consistency, engagement, and individualization in early English education. By establishing clear and predictable routines teachers create a secure environment that fosters student confidence and language development. Engaging activities, such as songs, movement, and storytelling, are highlighted as essential tools for reinforcing vocabulary, building comprehension, and promoting active participation. The article also discusses the value of connecting lessons to students' everyday experiences and minimizing the use of their native language to enhance immersion. Furthermore, the author emphasizes the need for individualized instruction, recognizing that each child learns differently and benefits from a variety of teaching methods. Drawing from firsthand experience in diverse educational settings in Japan, the article provides practical insights for creating an engaging, supportive, and effective English language learning environment that nurtures both linguistic and personal growth.

この記事では、早期英語教育における一貫性、関与、個別化の重要性を強調しながら、幼い学習者に英語を教えるための効果的な戦略を探る。明確で予測可能なルーティンを確立することで、教師は生徒の自信と言語発達を促進する安全な環境を作り出す。歌、運動、ストーリーテリングなどの幼い学習者にとって魅力的なアクティビティは、語彙を強化し、理解力を高め、積極的な参加を促すために不可欠なツールとして強調されている。また、イマージョンを高めるために、レッスンを生徒の日常体験に結びつけ、母国語の使用を最小限に抑えることの価値についても論じている。さらに著者は、子どもたち一人ひとりの学び方が異なり、さまざまな教授法から恩恵を受けることを認識し、個別指導の必要性を強調している。日本の多様な教育現場での実体験をもとに、言語的成長と人間的成長の両方を育む、幼い学習者に魅力的で、協力的で、効果的な英語学習環境を作るための実践的な洞察を提供する。

Introduction

Teaching English to young learners presents a unique set of challenges and opportunities. Effective teaching in this context requires more than just imparting knowledge; it involves creating a safe, engaging, and supportive environment that encourages students to develop language skills while nurturing their confidence and curiosity. This article explores a holistic approach to teaching English to young learners, highlighting the importance of clear routines, engaging activities, such as songs and stories, and personalized instruction that meets the diverse needs of students.* By focusing on consistency, interaction, and individualization, teachers can cultivate an environment where students feel secure and motivated to learn.

Clear and Consistent Routines

One of the foundational elements of effective early childhood education is the establishment of clear and consistent routines. Young learners, especially those learning a second language, benefit immensely from predictable and well-structured class activities. Routines provide students with a sense of security, helping them gain confidence as they navigate the classroom environment. Knowing exactly what activity is coming next allows students to focus their mental energy on the task at hand rather than on the uncertainty of transitions.

Consistency in routines also means that students can anticipate the flow of the lesson and understand what is expected of them at each stage. Whether it is a simple transition between activities or a more complex process like preparing for lunchtime, repetition and clear expectations guide students through these moments without confusion. This sense of security fosters trust in the teacher's authority and allows students to devote their attention to language acquisition rather than to managing uncertainty.

The power of repetition cannot be overstated in early education. Repeated activities, whether through songs, stories, or classroom routines, reinforce learning and provide students with ample opportunities to internalize new information. When students are consistently reminded of expectations, even for seemingly mundane tasks, they become more self-assured in their ability to navigate the classroom environment, which in turn supports their language learning.

Engaging with Songs and Movement

Songs and movement are powerful tools for language acquisition in young learners. Repetition, especially in the context of songs, allows students to familiarize themselves with vocabulary, rhythms, and patterns of English in a fun and interactive way. Singing the same songs multiple times, using

consistent tone and rhythm, helps to build both vocabulary and confidence. As students become more comfortable with these songs, they begin to anticipate what comes next, further enhancing their learning experience.

Incorporating movement into lessons not only makes learning more engaging but also provides students with the opportunity to be active participants in their education. Songs with actions or simple dances allow students to engage kinesthetically, making learning enjoyable and memorable. Importantly, every student, regardless of their language ability, can participate. Movement-based activities are inclusive and provide all learners with the chance to 'shine' in their own way. This sense of participation builds confidence and reinforces the idea that every student, regardless of language proficiency, has something valuable to contribute.

Reading Stories to Build Vocabulary and Comprehension

Reading aloud to students is another essential component of effective language instruction. Even when students do not fully understand every word or concept, being immersed in a story exposes them to rich language and new vocabulary. The key to successful storytelling lies in the teacher's ability to make the story exciting and engaging. Teachers should use varied tones, facial expressions, and gestures to draw students into the world of the story, making it accessible even for beginners.

Moreover, selecting stories that are thematically aligned with the day's lesson helps to reinforce vocabulary and grammar in a context that is relevant to the students' learning. For example, a story about animals can complement a lesson on animal-related vocabulary, enhancing students' understanding of both language and content. By asking questions during the reading, encouraging predictions, and discussing the pictures, teachers can foster active engagement and comprehension. Varying the pace of reading, emphasizing important words with different vocal tones, and encouraging students to react to the story all contribute to keeping students focused and involved.

While it is beneficial to introduce new stories regularly, there is also great value in revisiting the same story multiple times. Familiarity with a story allows students to engage more deeply, as they begin to anticipate events, recognize vocabulary, and even participate in the reading. This sense of familiarity provides comfort, reinforcing students' confidence in both their comprehension and their language abilities.

Connecting Learning to Students' Lives

Effective language learning occurs when students can relate new information to their own experiences. By connecting English language learning to children's everyday lives, teachers can make lessons more relevant and engaging. For instance, vocabulary and concepts can be tied to familiar

objects, activities, and experiences that students encounter regularly. This not only reinforces the meaning of words but also helps students see English as a useful and integral part of their lives.

Additionally, incorporating activities that connect fine motor skills—such as writing letters or drawing pictures—helps reinforce learning in multiple ways. Writing the alphabet, for example, connects the shape of the letter to its sound and meaning, providing students with a visual and tactile experience that reinforces memory. Creating a thematic framework for each lesson allows students to explore a topic from various angles, deepening their understanding while maintaining interest and engagement.

This thematic approach also allows students to learn in ways that align with their individual strengths. Some students may excel in drawing or creating art, while others may thrive through oral language activities or storytelling. By providing a range of learning opportunities within each lesson, teachers cater to the diverse needs of their students and ensure that every student has the chance to succeed.

Minimizing the Use of Native Language (Japanese)

In language immersion classrooms, one of the most important principles is minimizing the use of students' native language. Even very young students can learn effectively in an English-only environment, provided that teachers use a variety of strategies to ensure comprehension. This might include using gestures, visual aids, and demonstrations to clarify meaning. When students are consistently exposed to English, they gradually begin to internalize language structures and vocabulary.

However, this does not mean that the teacher should completely exclude the students' native language. On the contrary, especially with younger learners, students should feel free to express themselves in Japanese or another native language when necessary. Teachers can listen to students in their native language and respond in English, thus maintaining the flow of communication while encouraging language use in English. This approach helps build trust and ensures that students feel comfortable in the classroom. Importantly, teachers should avoid forcing students to speak prematurely, instead gently encouraging verbal expression as students become more confident.

Building Trust and Individualizing Instruction

At the heart of successful language learning is a safe and supportive learning environment. Trust between students and teachers is essential for students to feel secure enough to take risks with language use. When students trust their teacher and feel emotionally and socially comfortable, they are more likely to engage with the language, take risks, and develop confidence.

Recognizing the individuality of each student is also crucial. Every child learns differently, and it is important for teachers to create a classroom environment that offers diverse opportunities for learning. Some students may learn best through visual or hands-on activities, while others may excel in oral language practice or written exercises. By incorporating a variety of teaching methods and materials, teachers can ensure that all students are able to engage with the content in a way that resonates with them personally.

Conclusion

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to teaching English, certain principles are universally effective in creating a dynamic, supportive, and engaging language-learning environment. Consistent routines, songs and movement, reading stories, and connecting learning to students' lives all play vital roles in helping young learners develop language skills. Furthermore, minimizing the use of native language, building trust, and individualizing instruction ensure that students feel secure and motivated. By embracing these universal strategies, teachers can create an environment where all students, regardless of their background or learning style, have the opportunity to thrive and develop their language abilities. This approach fosters not only linguistic growth but also confidence, creativity, and a lifelong love of learning.

Note: *The information and materials presented in this article are derived from the author's firsthand observations while teaching English to young learners, ranging from preschool to elementary school students (up to grade six) in various educational settings in Japan. These settings include public elementary schools, private preschools, international schools, and Saturday schools. While there are undoubtedly existing research studies and academic publications that explore similar topics, this paper aims to offer practical insights and suggestions that may assist educators in planning and delivering more effective lessons for young English learners. The goal is to provide guidance on presenting content in a manner that enhances students' learning outcomes.

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Tomoko is a dedicated educator with extensive experience in both teaching and curriculum development, specializing in language instruction for young learners. With a career spanning over two decades, Tomoko has taught a wide range of students, from preschoolers to elementary-age children, in diverse educational settings across Japan and the United States. Currently, a Japanese teacher at St. Michael's International School in Japan, she is responsible for planning and delivering engaging Japanese lessons to students aged 4 to 11.