Adapting EFL Teaching to the Young Learner Context

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1.0   Introduction

The teaching of young learners has come to represent a very specialized and comprehensive field of EFL.   With the expansion of English as a means for international communication, more countries and parents seek to start their children in EFL programs at younger and younger ages, making this one of the quickest growing areas in English education.   Still an area in constant development, the teaching of foreign languages to young learners presents many new challenges to language teachers.   Recent research reveals how young learners and adults differ in their acquisition of language and provides evidence for how teaching methods need to vary depending on the age, cognitive development, and motivations of the child.

Traditionally the teaching of young learners in many societies has not been seen as holding much educational merit and, particularly with preschool-aged children, merely seen as an extension of mothering (Cameron, 2001 : xii).   Persistent beliefs regarding the teaching of foreign languages in such situations has been perceived as periphery at best, and at worst, as an impediment to the L1 and socialization of the child.   However, with contemporary language research contributing to a better understanding of how children learn, and in particular how they learn language, should we not be able to better train and prepare EFL teachers of young learners ?

This paper will focus on three main ways in which EFL teaching needs to be adapted to the needs of young learners (YLs).   I will start by considering the age factor and look at some key theories that provide insight into how the roles of age and level of cognitive development should dictate YL teaching methodologies.   After this, I will evaluate the main differences in how YLs differ from adult learners (ALs) in the ways they think and organize their world, as well as the contrasting learning strategies that they employ in learning language.   Finally, I will appraise the differences in foreign language learning motivations between YLs and ALs, and consider how these should be reflected in EFL teaching methodologies.

2.0   Young Learners : The Age Factor

It would seem quite obvious that there should be a difference in the approaches taken in teaching EFL to YLs as compared to teaching ALs.   However, the reasons why, and the ways in which, we should adjust our teaching methodologies may not be as obvious.   For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on YLs at the elementary school level, between the ages of 5-12, where more and more children worldwide

are now being introduced to EFL in a classroom setting.　Here I will review two age-related concepts that separate YLs from ALs.

2.1　Critical Period Hypothesis

In consideration of age in EFL teaching, one topic of great interest to researchers, teachers, and language policy makers is the ideal age at which to start teaching foreign languages.　Traditionally, the learning of L2 was, and in some contexts is still, considered best undertaken after the mastery of the L1. Howatt points out that historically speaking, the teaching of a foreign language to YLs has long been 'perceived as a threat to the teaching of the mother tongue' (1991 : 289).

However, more recent research is in support of starting foreign language studies from an early age. In particular, the *critical period hypothesis* (CPH) theorizes that there is a timeframe during childhood when a foreign language is most effectively learned.　The reasoning is based on the belief that children's brains maintain the tools for L1 acquisition only up until a certain age, and that these same tools can also be employed in the efficient development of L2.　Beyond this period, however, we lose many of these implicit learning abilities, particularly those associated with phonological development.　For this reason, CPH is particularly relevant in arguments concerning the development of native-like mastery of a foreign language.

According to proponents of CPH, what ages constitute this critical period ?　Specific ages vary among researchers : some claim it starts from as early as two years old, while others claim the cutoff point can be anywhere between 7-15 years of age (Pinter, 2011 : 51).　In general, supporters of CPH agree that 'the younger the better'.　Mayo and Lecumberri sum up three commonly accepted points of CPH (2003 : 8) in that beyond a certain 'maturational stage' :

Point 1 : learners are not able to attain native-like levels of proficiency
Point 2 : successful learning requires more effort than before
Point 3 : the processes of L2 acquisition are quantitatively different than before.

It is important to understand that these points suggest a stage at which there are differences in *how* the learner learns, and hence how they should be taught.　There are researchers who would not agree with the absolutism of these statements, yet agree with them as accurate generalizations.　There are also others such as Wicking (2008), as well as Mayo and Lecumberri (2003) who would argue a more gradual decline in L2 learning potential as opposed to a sudden 'cut-off point' after such a maturational stage.

Point 1 above may not be as relevant for learners who do not aim for the lofty goal of native-speaker level proficiency, particularly in contexts where basic communicative competence is a more realistic and manageable target.　However, it still identifies those who start EFL younger as having an advantage in their eventual level of attainable proficiency.　Point 2 refers to the difference of intrinsic and extrinsic learning strategies of YLs and ALs.　Point 3 states that there is a cognitive difference in the language learning abilities between YLs and ALs.　YLs indeed use altogether different mechanisms for L2 learning, as will be focused on in more depth below in section 3.　What can be taken from CPH is that the age

of the learner needs to be taken into account when adopting EFL teaching to the learning abilities of YLs.

2.2　Age and Zone of Proximal Development

When considering the age factor in EFL teaching, age differences amongst YLs themselves must also be considered : is it appropriate to teach a 5 and 12-year old using the same methodology ？ It can be difficult to define boundaries that separate YLs by specific ages. Pinter points out that even children within the same age range and teaching context often exhibit significant differences partly due to the fact that they develop and learn in 'spurts' (2006：2). Despite the uniqueness of each child, there are generalizations that can be made of YLs that can be helpful in developing age-appropriate teaching approaches, as shown in Table 1 below.
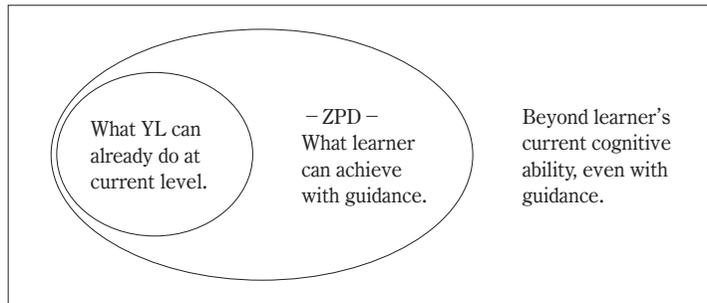
Table 1：Characteristics of Younger and Older Child Learners (adopted from Pinter, 2006：2)

Younger Learners	Older Learners
· In pre-school or first years of schooling · They understand meaningful messages, but cannot yet analyze language · Lower levels of awareness about themselves as language learners and about the process of learning · Limited L1 reading and writing skills · Generally concerned about themselves more than others · Limited knowledge of the world · Enjoy fantasy, imagination, and movement	· Well established at school and comfortable with school routines · Show a growing interest in analytical approaches, growing interest in language as an abstract system · Growing level of awareness about themselves as language learners · Have developed reading and writing skills · Growing awareness of others and their viewpoints · Begin to show interest in real life issues

One popular theory of child language development that identifies a common YL learning trait is the *sociocultural theory*, as first proposed by Lev Vygotsky in 1962. This theory maintains that language develops through social interactions and that children use language to construct their understanding of the world. Lightbown and Spada point out that sociocultural theory links cognitive development to such social interactions in that learners 'gain control of and reorganize their cognitive processes during mediation as knowledge is internalized' (2006：47). Applied to the context of young learners in EFL, sociocultural theory necessitates active, meaningful communication in the classroom between teacher and student, as well as between students.

Accordingly, under the sociocultural theory, how should we adjust our teaching to promote YLs language learning ？ Closely linked to sociocultural theory and language learning is another of Vygotsky's concepts : the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the area of knowledge just outside the child's current ability, which is unattainable without social interaction and guidance from an adult. This concept proposes that beyond the ZPD, there is also a larger body of knowledge that is inaccessible by the child learner, even with guidance, as it is outside the YLs current stage of cognitive development. The concept of ZPD is illustrated in Table 2 below.

Table 2 : The Zone of Proximal Development

What YL can already do at current level.

− ZPD −
What learner can achieve with guidance.

Beyond learner's current cognitive ability, even with guidance.

For language teachers, the concept of ZPD provides a learning target, as well specifying the means to help the YL reach the ZPD : social interaction.　Children by nature crave challenge and stimulation to grow.　Children may grow bored and lose interest in activities and targets that are already within their current ability level.　Another danger is that they may actually only be focusing on the enjoyment of an activity, yet it provides no actual learning opportunities in the ZPD.　At the other extreme, YLs can become easily frustrated with targets that fall well outside of their ZPD. Pinter (2011 : 17) notes that YLs that appear to be at the same developmental level based on test scores may respond very differently to guidance within their ZPD.　Guidance in EFL teaching may involve direct interaction with an adult, or take the form of well-designed activities aimed at the learn-er's ZPD.　As daunting as it may seem, we must be able to judge each individual child's ZPD 'on the fly' as Cameron points out, 'skilful teachers⋯ manage to do this in a class of thirty or more different ZPDs' (2001 : 6).

As I have touched on in this section, the ages of YLs are closely related to their ever-developing cognitive abilities.　In the next section I will look at how YL's cognitive differences demand different approaches in EFL teaching contexts.

3.0　Differences in How YLs Think and Learn

Consider for a moment the traditional teacher-centered language classroom : desks in neat forward-facing rows, students quietly listening to the teacher, with exercises in rote drilling, shadowing of artifi-cial dialogues, and memorizing sterile texts.　While certainly becoming less common nowadays, such contexts are still the preferred learning style for many ALs who were brought up in such classrooms and who developed analytical learning strategies adapted to such teaching methodology.　With an under-standing of the research behind how children think and learn, we know that such a learning context is perhaps the most ineffective way to teach EFL to YLs.　YLs just do not think or learn languages (or much else) in such ways.

Even with no prior exposure to, or experience in, the foreign language, YLs instinctively have a skill set that, when properly utilized, makes them effective foreign language learners.　These are the same skills that children employ in the development of their mother tongue.　In general, the younger the

learner, the more connected they will be to this skill set.　Halliwell (1992 : 3-8) identifies six core language learning characteristics of YLs as listed below :

1.　good at interpreting meaning without understanding individual words
2.　great skill in using limited language creatively
3.　frequently learn indirectly rather than directly
4.　take pleasure in finding and creating fun in what they do
5.　great imagination
6.　take delight in talking

　　In the EFL classroom, teachers may take advantage of these skills to help facilitate YL's L2 development in ways less structured, less analytical, and less direct than ALs would typically learn.　Such teaching strategies could involve the implementation of body language and facial expressions, as well as physically 'acting out' the L2 being used.　We should also exploit YL's creative abilities by allowing opportunities for them to experiment with language communicatively and creatively, thus encouraging them to guess, make mistakes, and generate their own language.　YLs better internalize language when they can make it their own.　The design and employment of games where children's attention is focused on the game itself rather than the language provides opportunities for indirect language learning through *noticing*.　As imagination is part of the YL's strategy for making sense of the world, this can also be incorporated into language lessons to open an endless realm of possibilities for what is 'genuine' language use in the child's world.　Teachers should also provide frequent opportunities to 'make the L2 real' for children in using the language to express themselves outside of the more structured activities.　Students should be encouraged to use the L2 in expressing their feelings and wishes, just as they would in their mother tongue.

　　Considering the YL's special skill set, and the ways in which EFL teachers must adapt to the learning needs of YLs, we see that where ALs are generally much more analytical in their learning styles, YLs have a much more active and experiential sense of learning.　This ties in directly with the *cognitive-developmental theory*, another influential theory of YL language learning proposed by Jean Piaget in 1971. This theory maintains that children create their knowledge through actions and their interaction with their environment.　Cameron points out in the 'active construction' of knowledge within cognitive-developmental theory, for the child, that 'it is through taking action to solve problems that learning occurs' (2001 : 2).

　　It is most relevant that YLs differ from ALs in their language learning skills as they are constantly constructing, and re-constructing, their own understanding of language and the world as they learn.　As such, in order for EFL teachers to adapt their teaching, they should also be aware of how YLs organize concepts and categories.　Although children are limited in their experience, cognitive abilities, and linguistic repertoire, they often display very creative use of language to describe and define the world. Children think in the terms and concepts most relevant and concrete to them.　Table 3 below shows some examples of how YLs and ALs differ in how they may define and understand words through their own conceptualizations.

Table 3 : Comparison of YLs and ALs Definitions (adopted from Cameron, 1994 : 29)

YL Definition	AL Definition
daddy ↓ a mommy who is a man gasoline ↓ milk for the car	parent ↙　↘ mommy　daddy liquids that provide energy ↙　↘ milk　gasoline ↙↘　↙↘ skim　cream　diesel　unleaded ↙↘ regular　premium

As we can see in this example, YLs structure their understanding horizontally across concepts, while the AL structures it vertically, using hierarchical categories.　YLs require further language and cognitive development before being able to rearrange their concepts in such a fashion.　YLs tend to start out their conceptualizations in the middle of categorical hierarchies, moving up and down and expanding their understanding as their experiences, education, and cognitive development progresses.

The ways in which YLs conceptualize the world certainly has a significant impact on how we need to adapt our introduction of new words and concepts in the EFL classroom.　Furthermore, this process of conceptualizations is not universal, yet a process feasibly unique to each culture and language.　Cameron points out that 'different languages and people may divide the world differently' and that 'learning a new language may require a restructuring of knowledge' (1994 : 32).　Therefore, a teacher's awareness of a possible shift in conceptualizations across languages, at the level of the YL's conceptual processes, is also a necessity in the EFL classroom.

Another relevant area of research that has significantly affected YL teaching methodology is that of Howard Gardner's *multiple intelligences theory* that further subdivides YLs by their individual learning strengths.　Multiple intelligences theory recognizes eight distinct *intelligences* that may or may not be shared in varied degrees among YLs : linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, body-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligence (Armstrong, 2003 : 3-4).　Although exploring this area in depth is beyond the scope of this paper's focus, it is another pertinent example of how the individual cognitive and learning needs of YLs necessitate attention when considering YL teaching methodology.

Having touched on some of the unique ways in which YL's learning and thinking vary from ALs, in the following section I will examine the areas of motivation and support of YLs in the EFL classroom.

4.0　Motivational and Supportive Differences between YLs and ALs

A third major way that young learners differ from adult learners in an EFL context is in terms of motivations.　Although there are varied types of motivations, they are a fundamental component of lan-

guage learning.　Adult learners may display any given type of motivation, or more likely, a combination of motivations : extrinsic, intrinsic, integrative, and/or instrumental.　A teacher's own enthusiasm and teaching methodology may also have an effect on an AL's motivation, but most adults enter the classroom with a pre-existing set of motivations.　In contrast, YLs in the context of an EFL classroom are unlikely to have any immediate or pragmatic need of the L2, feel pressure for passing L2 tests, or have exposure to the language outside of the classroom.　Much more than in the case of ALs, teachers of YLs in such contexts must work to positively affect student motivations to learn, and to continue learning, the L2.

As identified in the previous sections, YLs are generally characterized as having an intrinsic desire to talk, often in very personal and immediate ways.　They also learn best when focus is on meaning and the need to construct understanding through social interaction.　Such innate traits are ideal for foreign language learning, and as long as these characteristics can be continuously nurtured and utilized through teaching methodology, they also help instill intrinsic motivation in the YL.

Of course, this does not guarantee that every child will be motivated all of the time.　The teacher plays a vital role in YL motivations.　Paul (2003 : 23) identifies six important factors influencing YL motivation specifically within EFL contexts, each which can be positively affected at least in some way by the teacher :

1.　Does the YL view language learning as a personal adventure ?
2.　Does the YL perceive themselves as being successful in their language learning ?
3.　Does the YL recognize that what they learn in class is transferrable to other meaningful situations ?
4.　Do the YL's family and friends maintain a positive and encouraging attitude towards their language learning ?
5.　Is there an absence of extrinsic rewards (and a sense of intrinsic motivation) ?
6.　Does the YL expect to be evaluated, feel threatened, or watched and checked up on ?

Teachers of YLs can affect students' motivations in both direct and indirect ways.　It is important that teachers make language learning an enjoyable and meaningful process, aimed at the YL's ZPD.　In doing so, teachers help ensure that YLs feel a sense of accomplishment and progress as they learn.　Of course, constant encouragement, praise, and support are also important to instill a sense of pride in what YLs have accomplished, while keeping them from feeling ashamed of what they can't do.　In establishing a sense of adventure and pride in the learning process, we are nurturing intrinsic motivation and removing any need for more temporary extrinsic motivations such as prizes or rewards.　In the same light, by moderating extrinsic pressures such as evaluations and tests, we help keep motivation coming from within the YL.　Involving family and friends in the YL's L2 learning also helps make the language more meaningful and 'real' by expanding the L2 out from the boundaries of the classroom.　Doing so provides additional motivation through further chances for the child to learn and feel pride in their accomplishments.

Positively affecting YL's motivation for language learning can be effectively implemented within the type of teaching methodology used.　Traditional teacher-centered classrooms with fixed lesson plans,

logical explanations of the subject matter, and quiet children in well-arranged rows would seem to do little to positively affect YL's motivations.　While in a communicative, student-centered AL classroom the teacher removes themselves as much as possible to affect learning, the YL classroom requires the teacher to take much more of an active role.

The active role of the teacher in YL's language learning is supported by yet a third theory of how language influences cognitive growth : *scaffolding*.　The concept was proposed in 1976 by Jerome Bruner, founded on both Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories.　Due to YL's cognitive restraints, many times YLs may have problems maintaining attention on a task or keeping the larger aim in mind.　Scaffolding is a supportive teaching mechanism where an adult provides necessary support, motivation, and guidance (within the ZPD) to the YL.　Pinter (2006 : 12) identifies the main implementations of scaffolding :

・The adult offers the YL immediate, meaningful support when needed
・The adult encourages the YL with praise
・The adult points out possible difficulties and suggests or shows strategies
・The adult minimizes distractions and helps the YL stay on track
・The adult helps the YL stay motivated and focused to finish the task
・Adult support is adjusted to the needs of each individual YL

In a very definite sense, with scaffolding implemented in the EFL classroom, the teacher and YL become *partners in learning*.　In contrast, ALs have a much more developed learner autonomy, as well as a set of analytical strategies to cope with the challenges of language learning on their own.　Cameron comments on scaffolding in that 'in directing attention and in remembering the whole task and goals on behalf of the learner, the teacher is doing what children are not yet able to do for themselves' (2001 : 9). In such, the teacher gains much more active influence on the YL's language learning motivations.

Having examined three major factors that separate YLs from ALs in terms of language learning, I will now explore ways is which AL teaching methodologies can be practically adapted to the needs of YLs.

5.0　Discussion ─ How These Factors Should Affect YL Teaching Methodologies

In the previous sections, I have identified three major ways in which young learners differ from adult learners in an EFL teaching context : (1) how age affects cognitive development and language learning needs, (2) the differences in how YLs think and effectively learn, and (3) the teacher's active role in affecting motivation and providing support to the YL.　YLs are much more than just 'smaller versions' of ALs.　As has been shown, in many ways, teaching YLs can be a much more complex and demanding task than teaching ALs.　Cameron advocates that YLs in fact have 'huge learning potential' and that we 'do them a disservice if we do not exploit this potential' in the EFL classroom (2001 : xii).　In this discussion, I will explore some pragmatic applications of how EFL teaching has been adjusted to the needs of YLs, relating directly to the factors I have identified above.

Some educators, such as Bourke (2006), advocate task-based or topic-based syllabi for the needs of

YLs. He compares these 'dynamic' syllabi to more static theme-based or structural syllabi that focus on form over function, and which prescribe the exact language to be studied. Task- and topic-based methodologies are argued to be an ideal match to the YL's learning strengths in a number of ways. The contents are easily adaptable to the ZPD of the YLs as language is not pre-determined. The learning experience is also more personal, meaningful, and experiential. Group work within such lessons is also conductive to social interaction and encourages the practical use of language through scaffolding. Additionally, as the learning of language is generally an indirect process within the focus on tasks, experimentation and 'playing' with the language is necessitated, while emphasizing function over form. Bourke points out that task- or topic-based syllabi are ideal as 'children learn best by doing — in the sense of exploring topics and engaging in meaningful tasks — in a stress-free and supportive learning environment' (2006 : 286).

Alternatively, with older YLs who have started to develop more analytical learning styles and may suffer from dwindling motivation, content-based lessons can be effective. Content-based lessons retain features of indirect language learning as well as attending to the need for continued active construction of knowledge and of the world within the more mature mind of older YLs. Wilson (2009) reports that ZPD- appropriate content from science and geography have been used successfully with her 12-year old learners.

Yet another broad-ranging teaching implementation specifically tailored to YLs is a curriculum that cycles English story books as the main classroom component. Rausch argues for a curriculum based on the use of stories as a fitting match for the needs of YLs, as it helps stimulate motivation, uses authentic materials that allow for communicative activities, and emphasizes YL's activation of imagination, creativity, and experiential learning (Rausch, 2008 : 9-11). Both Yukawa (2011) and Dlugosz (2000) also recognize similar values in reading stories in the YL classroom.

A concept that supports the argument for a story-based YL curriculum is the extended employment of scaffolding through *routines*. Routines such as storytelling are an effective teaching tool in that the amount of scaffolding and support is taken away little by little as the child becomes more able to predict and actively interact in the routine. Not only is the inherit scaffolding tailored to YL's learning needs, but routines 'combine the security of the familiar with the excitement of the new' (Cameron, 2001 : 9).

Tools such as *total physical response* (TPR) in which language learning is combined with physical movements is also effective with YLs. TPR activities help facilitate YLs remembering language experientially, as learning is linked to physical activity. Some researchers suggest that 'physical activity activates the brain' and 'builds neural networks in the brain and throughout the body' (Kampa, 2011 : 44). Nakamura (2008) expands on TPR theory with her 'active listening' activities that also make language input and learning a more experiential process for YLs.

One final idea that draws on many of the unique YL characteristics is that of more parental involvement in language learning. Extending L2 learning into the home attends to the concerns of L2 exposure being restricted to the classroom. It also is supportive of affecting YL motivations, the need for meaningful and experiential contexts in which to use the L2 for communication, and retains a system of scaffolding at home. Sawazaki (2009) reports support for and success in such an endeavor.

With an understanding of the differences between ALs and YLs, I have tried to present some specific

examples of how the particular needs of YLs can be met through the adaptation of EFL teaching methodologies.　With such a broad range of YL characteristics and the individual learning differences of YLs even within the same age group, these examples are by no means universally applicable or comprehensive.　They should illustrate however, that the teaching of YLs is indeed a very specialized realm of EFL and that there are a wide spectrum of teaching applications that can be adapted to the great variety of YL contexts and classrooms.

6.0　Conclusion

Recent research has shown that young learners exhibit an array of distinct learning and cognitive differences when compared to adult learners.　As one of the most rapidly growing areas of EFL, it is imperative that teachers be aware of these differences so that they can adapt their teaching methodologies to respond to the specific needs of YLs.　Like YLs themselves, this field is constantly evolving and requires our continued attention as it develops.　We now realize that good YL EFL teachers require skill sets in both understanding children's aptitudes in general as well as EFL teaching skills developed specifically for young learners.　The differences between ALs and YLs are so distinct that researchers such as Cameron claim there is even 'a much needed process of developing an applied linguistics for teaching languages to young learners' (2001 : xi).　Indeed, in the years that have passed since this statement was made, and with the plethora of research evidence now available, it seems that great strides have been made towards such a goal.

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