***English as a Second Language at Kindergarten – Importance of Non-Verbal
Language and Use of Total Physical Response to Elicit Communication***

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Abstract
As more and more experts urge the adoption of second language education from early
childhood, an increasing number of kindergartens all over the world have included
activities in L2, or bilingual programmes, in their curriculum. This paper is based on
eight years observation and teaching at St. Anna's Institute of Rome as an English
teacher at kindergarten and primary school levels; and is aimed to provide indications
and suggestions for English L2 teaching, to groups of very young learners - from
three to five years old.
These years of teaching with a communicative approach proved how non-verbal
language worked as a catalyser for the later spontaneous use of words. TPR (Total
Physical Response) methodology provided a number of techniques to motivate
children. Reflection-in-action and on-action helped to discriminate how metalanguage
(L1 or L2) affected contents of the lessons and results; and helped detect a stronger
need for non-verbal language when L2 is metalanguage. As a result of the experience,
it is possible to say that activities such as storytelling can be adapted to fit the need for
body expression, and role play and *realia* can be used for the same purpose.
Paramount importance must be given to the role of games, surprise, discovery and
experience-making. With this in mind, careful lesson planning and extreme flexibility
are fundamental. Hints will be given on how to present and introduce audio-video
material in the lesson; and, finally, observations will be made on the different
classroom settings.

Keywords: Second language teaching, pre-primary education, TPR

Introduction

Most people tend to believe that teaching at kindergarten may not need much specialization and it is an activity comparable to baby-sitting. Nonetheless, whoever is faced with the opportunity of teaching very young children is confronted with a number of questions concerning how to present a second language (from now on indicated as "L2") properly to an audience of people who are so young that they cannot articulate in their own native language.

Experts in the field of neurosciences, linguistics and pedagogy, however, insist on the high potential of early language learning. Indeed, in 2011, the European Commission issued a handbook to provide guidelines and examples of good practice for pre-primary school level. In the document, it is clearly stated that "tailored education programmes; suitably qualified and motivated staff; specific support to schools, staff and families; and monitoring and evaluation"[1] are factors contributing to creating high quality teaching standards; and they can be achieved through "an effective use of resources".

Granted that education is the result of a joint action of families, teachers and society, the present paper is meant to be a resource to support second language pre-school teachers in their daily challenges. Here, the concise theoretical basis is accompanied by practical examples, elaborated in eight years of observation and teaching as English L2 teacher at kindergarten and primary school levels, at Istituto S.Anna in Rome - Italy, from 2006 to 2014. The strategies and the activities proposed were carried out from the reflective practitioner's[2] point of view, with planning, observations, consistent analysis of every lesson, discussion with the other staff members and appropriate adjustments.

Lessons consisted of one hour a week for the 5-year-old children and half an hour for the 3 and 4 -three-year-olds; the classes were made up of 25 to 30 children from relatively homogeneous social backgrounds – on average from the upper middle class. Given this, there was obviously an urgent need to maximize the small amount of second language exposure time, and to find the most effective strategies within the communicative approach. Therefore, I found myself trying to answer some major questions on how to structure a syllabus and to plan my activities. For starters, I had to decide whether to use a monolingual or a bilingual exposure method; I then had to choose vocabulary and structures suitable to the development stage of the children. Bearing in mind that children at this age tend to favour an enactive mode to represent information, I eventually espoused the Total Physical Response methodology by James Asher and adapted it to almost all my activities, such as, for example, storytelling. In addition, I had to select and sort all the good audio-video resources for the different age needs and learn how to use them effectively. Finally, I considered the effect of the classroom setting on didactics. Only with this awareness was it possible

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[1] Commission Staff Working Paper, *European Strategic Framework for Education and Training (ET2020), Language Learning at Pre-Primary School Level: making it efficient and sustainable, A Policy Handbook,* Brussels, 7/7/2011, p. 11

[2] cf. Elliott, John, *Action Research for Educational Change,* Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1991

to work out sound and useful lesson plans suitable for 3, 4 and 5-year-old children. Examples of all the above are provided in the following paragraphs.

Bilingual or monolingual exposure?

According to the European Commission Staff's Handbook, both systems have been successfully implemented in several countries with concrete results. I have personally experienced both methods with my students: the first four years, bilingual exposure and, the following four years, monolingual exposure. Later on, I could appreciate the outcome of my choices when the children entered primary school - in which I was ESL teacher as well.

The starting point of this work is the language acquisition theory by Stephen Krashen, which states: "all that is necessary for the language acquisition is input that is interesting and comprehensible."[3]

"Interesting" here stands for meaningful, in other words, we do not teach language *per se* to children, but as a means of communication.[4] In fact, Commission Staff recommends integrating early language learning "into contexts in which the language is meaningful and useful, such as in everyday or playful situations, since play is the child's natural medium of learning in pre-primary"[5].

Having said that, we come to the second requirement of language acquisition: comprehensible input. This is the key issue of the matter and implies a different teaching action whether we choose to use a monolingual or a bilingual exposure system.

Monolingual exposure

A monolingual exposure system clearly has the advantage of providing a rich input, which we know to be a significant factor in language acquisition. Furthermore, since early language learning is proven to enhance the cognitive development of the child, facilitate concentration skills and flexibility[6], it would seem that a longer exposure to the second language could potentiate this process. However, when using target language exclusively, comprehension of the message content is limited and, according to the acquisition theory, only comprehensible input is eventually acquired. Another side effect of incomprehensible input is the rise of anxiety level. Therefore, monolingual exposure turns out to be counterproductive, in some cases, especially at the beginning, if the language teacher is in class only for few hours a week and has no time to establish an affective relationship. Children may feel uneasy because they do not know how to express their basic needs to an adult who does not seem to understand their first language (henceforth "L1").

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[3]Krashen, Stephen D., *Second Language Acquisition, Theory, Applications, and Some Conjectures,* Cambridge University Press, Mexico City, 2013, p.3

[4] Cf. Schick, Carla, *Il linguaggio,* Giulio Einaudi Editore, Torino, 1960

[5] Commission Staff Working Paper, op.cit., p. 14

[6] Cf. *Ibid.*

Bilingual exposure

On the other hand, bilingual classes allow the teacher to present himself/herself to the children in a pleasant and friendly way and introduce new vocabulary and structures providing a full understanding of the language contents. Children can be reassured in L1 and move at their own pace. Eventually, they spontaneously take part in the conversations, imitating the teacher or taking part in games when they feel comfortable.

Nonetheless, this way of teaching produces a smaller amount of target language input. This, in the long run, results in less familiarity with the second language, a stronger resistance when children are faced with longer chunks of dialogues, and a tendency to ask for confirmation and translation. As a result, bilingual exposure requires longer time for language acquisition.

A blended solution

After trying both the possibilities and other variations, I found what seems to be my ideal solution. It has the advantage of a longer exposure to the second language, with less anxiety. I am talking about a blended solution: a monolingual exposure with the following compromises.

- During the lessons, L2 teacher speaks only in target language, whereas an L1 mother tongue assistant helps with the basic needs of the children, especially during the first two years of kindergarten.[7] Thus, L1 assistant works as a reassuring presence to lower the affective filter, and steps in only in case of necessity.
- The learning pace of every single child must be respected. We do not want to put undue pressure on the pupils[8] by forcing them to speak L2 during their silent period[9]. We will allow, instead, a limited bilateral communication[10] until they are finally ready to switch to target language. This means they can answer in a language different from L2 and even in a non-verbal modality.

Parents tend to have high expectations of children's performance in the second language, but it is important to bear in mind that children must be free to speak L2 whenever they feel comfortable.

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[7] This solution recalls tandem language teaching, in which tandems of staff speaking different languages engage in everyday activities with the children, in both languages, for the same amount of time. The blended method hereby presented differs from tandem language method for the exposure time allowed the staff. In this background, L1 is the prevailing language while L2 is considered an extra activity.

[8] Cf. Commission Staff Working Paper, op.cit., p. 11

[9] "Children are usually allowed to go through a "silent period", during which they build up acquired competence through active listening." This period could last six months or more. Several scholars have suggested that providing such a silent period for all performers in second language acquisition would be beneficial." Krashen, Stephen D., *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*, University of California, 1981, p.8

[10] Cf. Dulay, Heidi, Burt, Martina, Krashen Stephen, *Language Two*, Oxford: New York, Oxford University Press, 1982

, That being the case, we can say that the proposed blended solution requires considerable collaboration with co-teachers, long preparation and patience, but the amount of input is high and the affective filter is low. These, we know, are crucial elements for a successful L2 acquisition and I could observe, indeed, that at primary school, even the children that would not speak English at kindergarten were able to follow and participate actively in L2 lessons.

Vocabulary and syllabus

"It is essential that […] the pedagogical processes correspond to the age range of the children."[11]

Piaget called the stage from two to six years old "pre-operative" period and it is characterised by the development of the concept of representation. Within representation modes, language is a system of symbols and not until age five do children develop a strong symbolic system. Concepts of permanence and reversibility are not mastered. That is why children's language at this age belongs to the realm of concrete reality; it pertains to things and events that can be measured, observed and conveyed through experience; things within the *here and now*. Every word has to correspond to what Krashen calls a "concrete referent"[12].

When designing a syllabus for pre-primary school children, we will include vocabulary representing the children's world in a concrete way, and will limit abstract concepts to a minimum. Flash cards, *realia* and audio recordings will serve the purpose. We adults have grown accustomed to abstract words and do not easily recognise them in everyday speech. For example, the simple word "family" could have a really extended definition. When I was asked to teach 3-year-old children the word "family", I did not think it was a problem, until I realised I could not say the word in L1. To create a concrete referent I had to show a family of puppets (mother, father and baby) and later, put on a little role play where children would replace the puppets and perform actions commonly associated with family.

The idea of the concrete world, in turn, brings us to think about how children come to know reality, which is through experience. Language teaching is not just a matter of words, but an experience. Learning through experience makes the language lesson meaningful. At this age, children are on their path to learn how to discern things by classifying them. They judge size and other physical properties from their appearance. Therefore, in our syllabus we will include adjectives indicating colour, size and numbers. The activities we choose to deliver these pieces of information, however, will be based on manipulation[13] and physical involvement, rather than on repeating and memorising the words. For example, in a lesson on the body parts, the words *eyes, nose, ear* and *mouth* can be associated with their correspondent sense. Children will have to see pictures, smell perfumes, listen to sounds and noises, and taste food. They will enjoy it more if the activity is presented in the form of a game and has elements of surprise (e.g. taking objects out of a box etc.)

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[11] Commission Staff Working Paper, op.cit., p.13

[12] Concrete referents are subjects or events which can be seen, heard or listened to when using the language. Cf. Dulay, Bart, Krashen, *op. cit.*

[13] Cf. Sharp, Evelyn, *Pensare a tre anni,* Armando Editore, 1970, p. 34

Representing information through actions with TPR

According to Jerome Bruner, there are three modes of representing information: enactive representation (through actions), iconic representation (through images) and symbolic representation (through language). The enactive mode is the earliest form of communication for human beings in their first year of life. From two years old, iconic representation is added and, only finally , significance is conveyed through symbols[14] - which means that we become capable of speaking languages with growing accuracy. Ergo, for children up to five years old, actions and images prevail in communication.

How can we teach a second language, a symbolic system, to students who do not master this communicative mode? The answer is by using their main modes of representation, i.e. through images and, above all, through actions. Even more so in a monolingual exposure environment, in which pupils and teacher rely a great deal on non-verbal information to complete the understanding of a word or a concept. James Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) method provides an effective solution. Here, learners act out commands given by the teacher. At first, the command is easy as in *stand up*, later on it gradually becomes more complex, combining words and other commands. This strategy allows children to use both parts of their brain so as to develop other skills; it satisfies their need to be active; attracts their attention; keeps them involved in the learning process; and works as an experience, which favours acquisition. For the teacher it works also as a form of assessment, especially when children are still in their silent period. If they react to a command it means they have understood and possibly acquired the information. A chant or a song with actions could work as - I would say - "musical TPR activity" and it has the additional advantage that the sound and the rhythm appeal to the children - who naturally start singing after a while. A well-known song like *Head and shoulders* can be an example of musical TPR. If we want children to be more engaged in the activities, we can use a puppet. When there is no assistant to help and no child in the class who understands the command the teacher is uttering, the puppet could serve as a model to imitate. For instance, I would invite my puppet to sit down or to stand up and make it move accordingly. Afterward, I would look at the children and give the same command. Initially, only one or two children would respond correctly, but I would clap my hands, smiling in approval; I would then repeat the command and more children would join in; eventually, the whole group would act out the commands properly.

What we have to bear in mind is that children have not yet developed body awareness and are not capable of imagining some else's point of view[15]. For this reason, if a 3-year-old pupil is asked to bend his/her knees, he/she may not be able to perform the action and would bend his/her torso, for example. This means that when we show them how to do the action, we have stand next to the children and do the action until they are able to reproduce it. For complex movements which involve other people and a better management of personal space - such as forming a circle - we have to show pictures and, most importantly, we have to be patient, since it may take months for the children to perform these tasks.

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[14] Cf. Bruner, J. S. *Toward a theory of instruction*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belkapp Press,1966

[15] Cf. Sharp, Evelyn, *op cit.*

Using movement in storytelling

Children love stories and storytelling is an effective activity to teach a new language. A story in a second language cannot be presented without pictures, otherwise it would be void of significance to very young children and they would not pay attention to it. Story cards[16] have to be prepared to accompany the narration so that words are associated with images and the meaning is explicit. However, preparatory activities are necessary to introduce the main vocabulary items. For instance, if we are going to tell a story about farm animals, we will ask the children to listen to the animal sounds first, and guess what they are. If their guess is right, we can introduce the name of the animal. We can also use flashcards[17] or toy animals. After one or two games with the new words, we can present the story. If we establish a routine for the storytelling, children will understand what is going to happen and start listening. If the story is accompanied by a recording with sounds and actors' voices, children will appreciate itmore . Like any other activity for children, the story has to be short and repeated. After listening to the story, we can assess the general understanding of the text with a movement game, such as miming. Once we are sure they have grasped the general meaning, we can propose a role-play activity using *realia* as props. If a prop is assigned to every character they will be able to associate the person with the character in the story. They will perform in small groups, one group at a time, with the recording going on while the teacher is showing the story cards. When they feel comfortable, they will spontaneously repeat the lines of their characters. So doing, we respect the children's pace, expose them to a lot of input, use pictures and action to convey meaning, and transform the learning activity into a playful experience.

Which audio-video material and how to present it

Experience is achieved through all the senses. Audio-video material appeals to sight and hearing and it is certainly helpful in language teaching. However, it must be adapted to the age of the children. Therefore, it has to be well-targeted, brief, well prepared and part of a learning experience. I used it as much as I could to allow children to familiarise with diversified input, pronunciation and intonation. Following are some examples of practice with both audio and video material.

Considering a 5-10 minutes span attention for children of this age, introducing songs or chants after every activity can be very productive. An example of a successful lesson with 3-year-old children is the one about night and day. The main idea behind it was that day is "playtime", while night is "sleeping time"[18]. Therefore, I wanted to convey a lively mood opposed to a quiet, peaceful mood. The vocabulary was: "good morning", "good night". The rooster was associated with "day", and the owl with "night". A story narration would show how to use the new words. Every activity was based on sounds and music: the crowing of the rooster and the calls of the owl, a lively song and a lullaby, the "good morning, good night" song and the story. Audio files were alternated with pictures and movement games, in blocks of maximum ten minute activities.

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[16] Story cards are pictures representing the sequences of a tale.

[17] Flashcards are images bearing information.

[18] At this stage children need to familiarise with the concept of time. A simple way to stimulate a growing awareness of time is by associating a period of time with its related activities.

Videos, as well, have to be short. No more than 10 minute long videos for 3/4-year-old children, and maybe 15/20 minutes for 5-year-old children. Needless to say, they have to be related to the contents of the lesson plan and specifically designed for young children: with small amounts of text and frequent repetitions. They are part of the lesson, not its core. The teacher should frequently ask for feedback from the pupils, where necessary, interrupting long video sequences. Language items of the video must be introduced before the viewing , whether with puppets, pictures or props. For instance, a lesson based on a video that my children enjoyed very much, was about body parts. I chose to present the topic with a short clip of the film "Pinocchio". Before showing the video, I prepared games based on it. One of these consisted of pulling out pictures of parts of the body from a sack and asking children to guess their names; I would then stick them on a board in the form of a puzzle and let them discover[19] who the character was. At this point, I still would not start the video, because I wanted more interaction, therefore I would start a movement game with commands in TPR methodology, which included actions associated with the related part of the body. Next, I introduced a musical TPR and only after that, would they be ready to watch the video, understanding its contents without acting restlessly.

What's the most effective classroom setting?

Over the years I have had the chance to try different classroom settings. A standard setting in which children are sitting around their tables in groups does not allow much space for movement, and interaction with the teacher is seldom possible. If bored, children start talking with each other and can be easily distracted. Furthermore, children in the front rows feel more involved than children at the back. The setting should allow a wider central space in the room for children to stand, come forward, walk, dance, perform a role play and form circles. An ideal setting for me is having a set of chairs fashioned in a U-shape, and groups of tables in the corners of the room. A blackboard at the back would come in handy. The teacher is then able to see everybody and the children can see each other since they already form an ideal circle. However, from time to time a change in the position of the seats and desks contributes to letting more children be involved and participate actively in the learning experience.

An example of lesson plan adapted to children's age

For children to be at ease and understand the general meaning of a lesson, it is important to set a routine: a sequence of actions, working as a container programme, which children can expect to happen and which can reassure them. Teaching in a routine allows changing the contents of the lesson with no stress on the children's side. However, an element of surprise must be introduced, from time to time, to keep their attention. Furthermore, children of this age can be remarkably unpredictable, and indeed, they will not react as we expect them to, if they are tired or restless. Kindergarten teachers must be really flexible and prepare a variety of activities and a good number of handouts in case of "surprises".

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[19] Cf. the discovery learning concept by J. Bruner on "the powerful effects that come from permitting the student to put things together for himself, to be his own discoverer." Bruner, J. S., The act of discovery, *Harvard Educational Review,* V. 31, 1961

Below , I attach an original lesson plan example adapted for the children of different ages. It shows the routine and the use of audio material and *realia,* and it is suitable for children's short attention span.

Class: 30 students

Age: 5

Level of the class: 3rd year kindergarten

Lesson length: 1hr.

Topic: The sea world

Target language: numbers 1-10; sea creatures: fish; actions: swim, fish, splash.

Objectives:
• Improving listening skills
• Speaking: saying numbers and new words; answering questions
• Singing a song reproducing pronunciation and intonation

Prerequisites: knowledge of the colours and the numbers 1-5, acquaintance with the language for the general instructions such as *stand up, sit down, form a circle, go, sing*.

Resources: story cards, a paper spyglass, a puppet fish, 30 fish drawings to hand out (or plastic toy fish), cd player.

Activities	Timing	Rationale
The Hello Song After the song the teacher introduces Mr. Fish (a puppet)	5 min.	The subject is presented to the children; speaking skills are activated with questions like *"Who's that?"* or *"What's his name?"* The word *fish* is introduced.
Let's swim Mr. Fish moves around, shows movements and asks the children to join in.	10 min.	The vocabulary related to the actions is presented with TPR methodology: input is first given by the teacher to the puppet; then the fish "talks" to the children and asks them to stand up, form a circle and act out his commands (*swim, splash in –* jumping in the centre of the circle - *stop* and *go*)
I'm a fish Children sit down and receive a toy fish (or a drawing) and they are asked to hold them up or put them down.	5 min.	Again a vocabulary activity with TPR methodology. This activity is quieter and prepares children to the story coming up. They usually do not want to sit down, but giving them a little surprise, a toy to play with, makes them want to play the game.

I can see one fish, two fish, three fish… Holding a pipe like a spyglass the teacher starts looking for fish. Children have to hide the fish and pop it out.	5 min.	With this game structures and song chunks are presented. Most of the children love to be in the spotlight and to fool adults with little tricks. While they will enjoy to be spotted through the spyglass, the teacher can repeat a number of times the target structure: *"I can see one, two, three fish…"*
Story time The story here is the based on the lyrics of the nursery song *One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive*	10 min.	Teacher has to prepare material in advance. When I say "story time", I show the puppet sitting down and point to my ears. Story cards are showed during the narration.
One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive The song is played while the story cards show their meaning.	5 min.	With this step, children associate the song lyrics with its meaning.
Role play Children are asked to mime the story.	10 min.	So far, children have been sitting for more than 15 minutes. The role play serves as a feedback for the teacher and as a physical activity for the children, which helps them in experiencing the language.
Goodbye song	2 min.	Ideally closes the lesson and fits it in the routine.

The following adaptations were carried out for younger children

Age: 4

Level of the class: 2^(nd) year kindergarten

Lesson length: 30 min.

Topic: The sea world

Target language: numbers 1- 10; sea creatures: fish; actions: swim;

Objectives:
- Improving listening skills
- Speaking: telling numbers and new words;
- Singing a song reproducing pronunciation and intonation

Prerequisites: knowledge of the colours and the numbers 1-5, acquaintance with the language for the general instructions such as *stand up, sit down.*

Resources: story cards, a paper spyglass, a puppet fish, 30 fish drawings to hand out (or plastic toy fish), cd player.

Activities	Timing
The Hello Song	2 min.
Let's swim After the song the teacher introduces Mr. Fish (a puppet) Mr. Fish moves around, shows movements and then asks the children to join in.	10min.
One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive The song is played while the story cards show their meaning.	5 min.
Role play Children are asked to mime the story.	10 min.
Goodbye song	2 min.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is a variety of possibilities to teach pre-primary children. There are no right or wrong answers. The lessons can be carried out in target language only, or with bilingual exposure, provided that children do not feel the pressure of speaking L2 at command. They must be respected in their times and ways and get involved in playful activities and meaningful experiences. Children should be allowed to convey information through movement, pictures and, when they cannot express themselves in a different way, in their own first language.

The teachers, for their part, must be thoroughly prepared, both on the theoretical basis, being well aware of the needs of children of this age and of their learning goals; and on the practical side, having sound lesson plans and proper material. On the other hand, they have to keep in mind that, even if they prepare everything meticulously, children at this age hold lots of surprises, therefore flexibility is a must.

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