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STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING AND CHALLENGING YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS[1]

Abstract: The transfer of lessons from in-person to virtual due to the pandemic that started at the beginning of 2020 required language teachers to adapt their pedagogical skills and apply methods different from the ones used when teaching in regular classrooms. The aim of the paper is to explore the ways for enriching language teaching methodology to respond effectively to the needs of young language learners in online learning environments, and to contribute to the body of teaching strategies that can successfully be applied in virtual environments. We consider the factors that contribute to enhancing language learning with technology, discuss the needs of young learners, and describe the conditions required for engaging all learners online. Then we discuss teaching strategies that may be applied to make online teaching environments engaging and challenging for all learners. We conclude that with adequate teaching strategies and multimedia materials language teachers can provide fun and engaging learning experiences for young learners in a number of online teaching contexts.

Keywords: language teaching strategies, online learning, young English language learners, teacher support, learner engagement.

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) to children is an extremely demanding task, made even more challenging in the last two years when teaching was mostly carried out online due the COVID-19 pandemic. The transfer of lessons from traditional to virtual classrooms required EFL teachers to adapt their pedagogical skills and apply methods different from the ones used when teaching in regular classrooms (Harrington, DeBruler 2021). Importantly, these new skills

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and methods did not depend exclusively on teachers' and learners' digital skills, but above all on teachers' ability to use technology effectively for teaching the English language. However, most teachers of young learners (YL) worldwide lacked training to teach English online and felt they needed professional development (PD) opportunities that could help them adapt to the new teaching environment as fast as possible (Harrington, DeBruler 2021; Milian et al. 2020). There have been some high-quality PD pogrammes in the form of webinars (e.g. Puchta 2020a, 2020b; Ross 2020; Shin, Borup 2020a, 2020b, 2020c), and a large number of blogs and papers with instructions how to enhance children's langage learning online (e.g. The TEFL Academy 2020; Thorburn 2020). These materials clearly indicated that the change of teaching environment from in-person to online required the use of new teaching methods (Shin, Borup 2020b) that had to be adapted by teachers to suit their particular contexts (Savić 2020).

The aim of the paper is to explore the ways for enriching language teaching methodology to respond effectively to the needs of young language learners in online learning environments and to contribute to the body of teaching strategies that can successfully be applied in virtual environments. We first discuss the factors that contribute to enhancing language learning with technology, both in synchronous and asynchronous environments. Then we consider young learners' needs and conditions required for engaging all learners online. Finally, we discuss the strategies that may be adapted to a number of virtual language teaching contexts.

1.1. FACTORS FOR SUCCESSFUL USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Success in using educational technology depends mainly on teachers' ability to apply technology and integrate it into their teaching primarily by focusing on "what students do or learn" (Kimmons, Graham, West 2020: 184). Moreover, teachers need to lead learners from passive stages of observing, listening, and reading, to more interactive collaboration and active exploration, like playing games that require problem solving, or creating digital flashcards for learning vocabulary (Kimmons, Graham, West 2020). Such activities involve analysing, evaluating and creating, which are identified as higher order thinking skills by Bloom's revised taxonomy of cognitive engagement, necessary for more effective and lasting learning (Krathwohl 2002).

Kimmons, Graham, and West (2020) argue that technology may have the following three different effects on teacher's practice: *replacement*, *amplification*, or *transformation* (Ibid: 187). Simple *replacement* of physical objects with digital ones, such as digital instead of physical vocabulary flashcards, or writing a text on a computer instead of on paper, may not improve learning because it does not change learners' behaviour. However, *amplification* in the form of an activity such as learners' recording a video to explain how to do a simple science experiment and posting

it on a common digital platform for discussion and feedback, or writing a blog post about a favourite dish and adding pictures to a text, may improve the outcomes of teaching and learning. Amplification also improves teachers' pedagogical practice, but not as much as it can be done at the level of *tranformation,* in which learners may interact with learners in a far away educational context, interview them using video conferencing tools such as Zoom, and collect information needed for completing a task, or create a video on how to prepare a local dish.

Both amplification and transfirmation contribute to more meaningful language use and make learning more effective by making it active and creative, and by connecting learners with the outcomes of their learning (Kimmons, Graham, West 2020). This is particularly relevant when teaching young learners, whose need for purpose and meaning in language learning directly affects their engagement in language learning activities (Shin, Crandall 2014).

2. YOUNG LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Key principles that define success in teaching English to young learners (TEYL) are related to children's cognitive and emotional engagement in learning and their sense of ownership of the language they develop in the learning process (Puchta 2020a). They stay the same irrespective of the mode of instruction. To ensure participation of all learners online, the activities should also respond to children's different interests, learning styles and cognitive, social and emotional needs. Therefore, in an online learning environment children's engagement is enhanced when integration of technology supports activities that involve them in life-like communication and collaboration in a safe environment of a strong learning community created by the teacher and the learners, in spite of the fact that learners are physically distant from the teacher and from each other. Shin and Borup (2020b) argue that apart from providing opportunities for children's language development and EFL communication skills, online language classes should also help children gain enthusiasm for langue learning and support the development of life skills, such as creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration.

When technology is effectively used to enhance language teaching and learning in the classroom, it provides learners with opportunities for experiencing comprehensible input, meaningful output, social interaction and useful feedback (Egbert, Abobakar 2018). Teacher monitors these opportunities to secure successful application of technology, which also allows him/her to differentiate instruction and adapt his/her teaching to fit all learner differences in his/her class. When using teachnology in an online learning environment, language pedagogy should be consistent with good practice of TEYL. Online teaching gives teacher even more possibilities to personalize instruction by giving learners more choice regarding

time, space, pace and path (Shin, Borup 2020c; Tucker 2021). Personalization of these important aspects of learning creates learning experiences that challenge and empower all learners. Giving learners choice of how to learn and how to demonstrate what they have mastered further supports learner agency and motivation.

We will explore how teaching method is adapted to fit an online learning environment in the ways that meet children's needs, allow amplification and transformation of online language learning, and contribute to the development of life skills. We will focus on how teachers of young learners manage to overcome barriers to engaging all learners and to create opportunities for their participation and progress.

2.1. ENGAGING ALL LANGUAGE LEARNERS ONLINE

When teaching children English, it is very important to consider their background knowledge, language level, and their motivation for learning a foreign language. Activities that respond best to their needs are games and game-like activities because they are "among the most natural means available for developing a context for communication with young learners" (Curtain, Dahlberg 2016: 337). Games play a significant role in language learning by providing opportunities for interaction, and if appropriately organised and scaffolded by the teacher, by allowing enjoyment and sustained motivation (Dörnyei, Muir 2019). An appropriate game, activity or task is the one in which the teacher manages to create a proper balance of demands such as cognitive, language, interactional, metalinguistic, involvement, and physical, on the one hand, and support, on the other hand (Cameron 2008). Curtain and Dahlberg (2016) argue that all enjoyable and motivating activities are often regarded as games by children, so the authors do not distinguish between a game and a successful activity that supports language acquisition. Good examples are some simple Total Physical Response (TPR) activities, such as *Simon Says*, that are usually referred to as games.

Another type of activities that is inherently motivating and engaging are projects, which respond to children's natural curiosity and investigative minds. Project-Based Learning (PBL) involves problem solving, and often requires the use of digital skills, critical and creative thinking and collaboration, which are regarded as 21st century skills needed for success in life and career. Moreover, PBL allows teachers to differentiate learning by letting learners make a number of choices, from who they want to collaborate with, through organizing the learning environment, to deciding how to present project results. In doing projects learners may need sustained support provided by the teacher in the form of sentence frames, functional chunks or expressions related to the theme of the project and the purpose of language use.

Successful activities are meaningful and purposeful, scaffolded and supported, interactive and active (Shin, Crandall 2014). In order to create conditions for developing learners' proficiency, teacher should plan and organise games and

projects taking care to meet several requirements (Curtain, Dahlberg 2016). Firstly, these activities should focus on developing communication skills, and the teacher should provide appropriate support in the form of language chunks that learners can use authentically – meaningfully and purposefully – when interacting in the activity. Secondly, games and projects should engage all learners and maximise their participation, which can be ensured by putting them into small groups or pairs. Thirdly, activities should encourage collaboration rather than individual competition. Fourthly, games should be short and simple, and both games and projects should be motivating and feasible.

The above guidelines need to be applied both in face-to-face and online teaching environments. However, this does not mean that the same kind of activities are appropriate for teaching face-to-face and online. Very often even the activities in which a computer is used successfully in a face-to-face environment do not manage to engage learners online (Shin, Borup 2020a). A different environment requires a different method: a creative digital activity may amplify or transform the process of learning. For example, learners may work in groups to create an electronic flyer announcing a school sports event, or transform it into a video in which they announce the same event in a creative way. Or they can do a project that will involve investigation, illustration, writing and speaking using a mouth animation tool such as ChatterPix (Shin, Borup 2020a) to present a local pollution problem, or record a video on the spot to present the same problem. These activities allow learners to own the process of learning while playing different roles in completing the task, depending on their interests and language proficiency. In such a way the activities allow teachers to differentiate their instruction in relation to learners' different learning styles, proficiency levels and interests.

3. STRATEGIES FOR EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENTS

Young learners need a lot of support and scaffolding in the language classroom, both in in-person and online environments. However, online classes may be quite challenging for the teachers in terms of making all learners feel safe and supported. Language teachers need new pedagogical strategies that work in synchronous and asynchronous teaching for creating a supportive environment, such as the strategies to provide comprehensible language input, to incourage communication and interaction, to provide clear instructions for a variety of activities (games and projects included), to give timely and supportive feedback, to create a clear routine, to manage time and pace of activities, and to keep learners engaged and challenged both in synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning.

3.1. PROVIDING COMPREHENSIBLE LANGUAGE INPUT

In contrast to a face-to-face classroom, in which teachers support their linguistic input with mime, gesture, facial expressions and body movements (Azeez, Azeez 2018; Yang 2017), in online environments it is very difficult to enhance children's comprehension with body language. It has been found out that teachers best support comprehension in online classes by providing the content in multiple formats, such as a text, audio and video input (Harrington, DeBruler 2021). Checking understanding in synchronous teaching can be done by asking learners to type in the chat box of the online platforms (e.g. Zoom or Google Meet) the letter or number associated with the answer they choose (such as *T* or *F* for *true* or *false*, or numbers or letters denoting the answers). Learners can also respond by showing predetermined colour-coded cards (e.g., a green one for *I understand fully* and a red one for *I'm not sure*), or by typing emojis in the chat box (thumbs-up or thumbs-down) to provide an immediate feedback to the teacher. Teacher's audio and written input has to be clear and supported with visual materials in different forms, such as pictures, graphs, photos, or video clips, to ensure comprehension.

3.2. ENCOURAGING COMMUNICATION AND INTERACTION

Classroom interaction is a key to developing learners' communication skills (Curtain, Dahlberg 2016). It is a challenge to provide enough opportunities for learners to interact in in-person lessons, and even more so when teaching online. The challenges of encouraging learners to participate are intensified in online learning due to communication barriers created in virtual environments and due to learners' hesitation as to when to speak and how to interact with the teacher and classmates. Therefore, teacher needs to vary interaction patterns in online teaching and enable pair and groups work, which can be done by using the software provided for group work, such as Breakout Rooms on Zoom. Interaction activities for young leaners that can successfully be organised online are quizzes, suveys and games (Harrington, DeBruler 2021), and in asynchronous teaching it is best to engage learners in group projects. These activities support interaction and the development of social skills through communication, team work, and collaboration.

Online activities that can enhance interaction are online versions of Think-Pair-Share, Project-Based Learning, Show and Tell, and Mystery Skype. The first activity begins with individual learners' ideas related to a discussion topic, which are then shared in a discussion with a classmate in a Breakout Room, and then with another pair in a new Breakout Room. The groups finally share their ideas with the whole class by using a shared Google document. The inspiring topic may be suggested by the learners or by a teacher. For example, the learners may discuss how to keep a local river clean or how to help poor children in school, which may

lead to projects for developing global citizenship skills. These projects can amplify language learning by allowing an extended discussion in a classroom blog, or it can transform language learning if a group of learners records a video of water pollution with a voice over, uploads it in Google Classroom, and invites other classmates to give comments and suggestions for cleaning the river. A synchronous lesson may provide opportunities for asking and answering questions about the projects to create a real-life like meaningful discussion.

Show and Tell is the activity that allows learners to engage in meaningful interaction to find out more information about the objects peers present on Zoom from home. The activity requires learners to select an object that is important to them, show it on screen to their peers, and say why it is special for them. Then peers can ask questions about the object, either by creating them independently, or by using sentence frames provided by the teacher. This kind of scaffolding allows the teacher to differentiate instruction according to the proficiency needs and levels of the learners. It is crucial to give the learners freedom to experiment with the language and also to give support when needed. Teachers can offer support either in the chatbox or on the screen. When the activity ends, all useful questions can be shared by the teacher as models for future discussions.

Online language learning does not limit interaction and communication to members of one class and the teacher. The teacher may arrange a Zoom meeting with a group of young learners from any corner of the world. A Mystery Skype is a game in which two groups of learners from around the world meet using Skype and ask each other questions to guess each other's location (Shin, Savić, Machida 2021). Mystery Skype game can be adapted to be played on the online platform such as Zoom of Google Meet to carry out an investigation for discovering each other's geographical location. This kind of an activity enables young learners to engage in authentic communication in English as a global language.

3.3. PROVIDING CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS

Probably the most challenging aspect of teaching online is giving clear instructions on how to do a complex activity, such as a game or a project, as there may be a lot of confusion and misunderstanding by young language learners. Teacher can avoid this by breaking the task into smaller steps, sequence the steps with numbered visuals, model doing the task, and show an example of the task result (Shin, Crandall 2014). Teacher can video record step-by-step instructions and post the recording in Google Classroom for learners to view as many times as they may need if they are expected to do the activity asynchronously. To alleviate learners' frustration, teacher can allow each learner to choose whether he or she would like to do the task alone, in a pair or in a small group, i.e. with or without peer support. After completing the task, learners may share a video explaining how to do the task,

thus providing the teacher with evidence of their understanding of the instructions and of confident use of functional chunks for giving instructions and sequencing them properly.

3.4. GIVING TIMELY AND SUPPORTIVE FEEDBACK

As learners are isolated in their homes while being taught online, they may need much more feedback from the teacher on how successful they are in completing individual exercises. Effective teachers use feedback to build a relationship with their learners and to motivate them. To achieve this, teacher's feedback has to be specific, consistent, timely and encouraging, often as part of formative assessment (Harrington, DeBruler 2021). Moreover, teacher may ask the learners to provide feedback to their peers upon a presentation on a selected topic. He or she may ask learners to write in the classroom blog about a new or surprising piece of information they learned from a peer's presentation, and to state what they liked about it. Doing peer-assessment teaches learners how to apply criteria to measure the efficacy of their own and peer's learning and to monitor their own progress.

3.5. CREATING A CLEAR ROUTINE

A clear routine in a language classroom provides learners with a safe and supportive environment as it helps them understand the teacher's requirements and instructions better, and prepares them for different stages in a lesson. A song or background music at the beginning of the lesson is a great routine to create the atmosphere of fun in language learning, much needed by young learners and easy to achieve in a virtual environment. Ending the lesson with a reflective activity, such as 3-2-1 routine helps learners view critically the lesson content and their process of mastering it: they reflect on three things they have learned, two things they found interesting or enjoyable, and one question they still have about the topic (Shin, Savić, Machida 2021). Instead of using a 3-2-1 slip that is needed in a physical classroom, teacher can ask learners to type in a chat box. This activity enables the teacher to measure the effectiveness of his or her online lesson as soon as it is over.

Routines and signals are necessary for keeping the learners focused or drawing their attention to rules or other arrangements related to smooth running of an online lesson. Sound or video signals can be used to indicate *No noise*, *End of activity*, *Story time*, and the similar, and learners should learn specific hand gesture for responding to the teacher's signal and for showing that they have heard and understood the signals. In this way teacher's classroom management will become easier and more structured, while children will learn to respect the rules and apply them.

3.6. MANAGING TIME AND PACE OF ACTIVITIES

In online environments time is used differently than in a physical classroom and substantial time may be needed to carry out group work in Breakout Rooms, while some individual drills may require little time both for completion and feedback. Flipping the classroom is a solution for using the online time more effectively as learners may read a text in Google Classroom, and the online lesson can be used more for clarifying the meaning and organising interesting group tasks with enough time allocated for completing them. The teacher can support all groups by visiting the Breakout Rooms to provide feedback and help when needed. When teacher sets a practice task for independent study, he/she saves time for communicative activities in synchronous online lessons.

Being energetic and kinesthetic, young learners may get tired and bored if the online lesson is too serious and static, and may need frequent breaks. The teacher should be sensitive to their feelings and reactions and ask them to stand up and spend a couple of minutes away from the screens. He or she may even give them an unusual task that requires movement, such as to look out of the window and report on what they have seen by typing three names of objects, or drawing them in their notebooks and naming them. This can be an opportunity for reviewing vocabulary and learning new words. Above all, this kind of a break can be a good energizer for the rest of an online lesson. The teacher needs a back-up plan related to the activities that can be omitted if there is not enough time, and the activities that can be done if there is still time at the end of the lesson, or when a break has to be introduced.

3.7. KEEPING LEARNERS ENGAGED AND CHALLENGED

An effective teacher provides opportunities for engaging and challenging all learners, which are essential conditions for making progress in the language classroom. Online learning requires different teaching methods compared to the ones used in a physical classroom. Firstly, teacher needs to build strong relationships with all learners in a class in order to ensure ongoing engagement (Harrington, DeBruler 2021). Secondly, he/she has to prepare thematically related multimedia materials that are at the level of his/her learners, and correspond well with their interests and the curriculum objectives. This requires familiarising with all learners' interests and preparing the materials that are more appealing and engaging than in a face-to-face environment. Thirdly, he/she has to be able to challenge and support learners while keeping the same curriculum objectives as aims to be achieved in a new environment.

Engaged learners are enthusiastic about the content they are learning and aware of the progress they are making (Puhta 2020a). Using games such as Kahoot

brings excitement and fun that engage learners. Kahoot can involve music and pictures and tasks of different levels of challenge to involve all learners and to ensure that everyone experiences success. This fun and interactive game can be played as an individual competition or a team competition to help learners practise the new language and build their language skills.

Another activity that can engage all learners is using a complex picture and a Choice Board with several quite different tasks that can be done individually, in pairs, or in groups: task 1: decribe the people in the picture, what they are wearing and doing; task 2: create a short dialogue/dialogues by predicting what the people may be saying; task 3: imagine yourself at the same place and describe your experiences and thoughts; task 4: draw the scene that may follow; task 5: draw the same scene, but introducing 10 differences for the activity Find 10 Differences; and task 6: create a story about the characters and the place from the picture. Near the end of the lesson, the learners can present their products and give each other feedback on the work done. By using a Choice Board the teacher keeps all learners engaged and challenged according to their interests and proficiency levels (Shin, Savić, Machida 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

Early language learning educators have been forced to rethink language learning in the light of pandemic and to adapt their teaching strategies to the new environments. The most significant result of the change has been the change of focus in language education from teaching to learning: the focus in online language teaching is on learning as a process, on the need to develop learners' learning-to-learn skills, on providing more personal feedback and personalized learning, on allowing learners more autonomy and freedom of choice related to the activities and materials, and on ensuring participation of all learners. Teachers can rely on multimedia and digital materials available on the internet, but may also create their own digital materials and use the materials created by the learners for amplifying and transforming their language learning. The paper has described some paths for teachers' development of new teaching strategies and explained how to adapt some activities used in in-person teaching to create fun and engaging learning experience for young learners in online environments in a number of teaching contexts. New teaching strategies may allow teachers to be as effective as in face-to-face classrooms.

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НАСТАВНЕ СТРАТЕГИЈЕ ЗА УКЉУЧИВАЊЕ И ПОДСТИЦАЊЕ УЧЕШЋА УЧЕНИКА МЛАЂЕГ УЗРАСТА У ОНЛАЈН НАСТАВНИМ ОКРУЖЕЊИМА

Резиме: Прелазак на онлајн-наставу услед ковид 19 пандемије почетком 2020. године захтевао је од наставника страних језика да прилагоде своје педагошке вештине и примењују методе другачије од оних које се користе у настави у учионици. Циљ овог рада је да испита начине на које се методика наставе енглеског језика може обогатити како би се ефикасно одговорило на потребе ученика млађег школског узраста у онлајн-окружењу, као и да допринесе корпусу наставних стратегија које се могу успешно применити у виртуелним окружењима.

У раду се најпре разматрају фактори који доприносе успешности примене технологије у настави страног језика, сумирају се потребе ученика млађег школског узраста и описују услови које треба задовољити како би сви ученици били ангажовани на часовима у онлајн-окружењу. Технологија може имати три различита ефекта на наставну праксу: *замена*, *појачање* и *трансформација* (Kimmons, Graham, West 2020). Док *замена* физичких предмета дигиталним не доприноси квалитативном унапређивању наставе, примена технологије на нивоу *појачања* или *трансформације* омогућава да се уз помоћ технологије страни језик користи за смислену и сврсисходну комуникацију, која је неопходна у настави страног језика на млађем узрасту и доприноси ефикасности наставе.

Рад се затим бави наставним стратегијама чија примена омогућава да сви ученици учествују у настави применом технологије за *појачање* и *трансформацију* наставе, као и да добију адекватан подстицај за учење у зависности од свог нивоа познавања страног језика. На крају се закључује да адекватне наставне стратегије и мултимедијални материјали омогућавају наставницима страног језика да организују онлајн-наставу која је подстицајна и мотивише све ученике да учествују у активностима и која се може применити у бројним онлајн наставним контекстима.

Кључне речи: стратегије за наставу страних језика, онлајн-настава, ученици енглеског језика млађег узраста, подршка наставника, учешће ученика у наставним активностима.