

Language development in the primary classroom

The term 'young learner' mainly refers to children from 6 to 10, though a child at 5 differs significantly from a child of 9 in their ways of acquiring and using a language. The main differences apart from individual characteristics and backgrounds lie in the level of general language awareness and social adaptability.

Younger children tend to understand situations better than they understand the language for the situations. They either pretend to understand or they understand messages in their own childlike ways that are different from older children's and especially from adults'. They use language skills before they are aware of them. They can work quite well on their own, but in groups they may feel uneasy and reluctant.

Older young children know more about the world and the language they use. Its basic elements are mainly in place. They can rely more on the language, understand it better, generalize and systematize. Their level of readiness to accept a foreign language is much higher now.

The social factors involved can display one more contradiction between having to develop a language individually and having to use it while communicating with others.

Having average children on their minds teachers have to admit the necessity of finding optimal ways to bridge the 'linguistic gap' between the two age subgroups. At the same time, there is still debate on how to approach young learners in their attempts to communicate meaningfully in a foreign language. What seems to be relevant includes various support for teacher's verbal messages, variety of activity, organization and mode of interaction, all possible forms of support and cooperation, relating meaning to the language, prevalence of activities not exercises, the latter being the greatest challenge for primary English teachers.