Myths and Facts about TEYL

Week 2

Discuss why the following statements are facts or myths about TEYL

- Children who learn a language before adolescence are much more likely to have native-like pronunciation.
- Children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates.
- Children only need to learn simple language and simple topics.
- Young children learn languages better.
- Foreign language learning at school should start early.
- Children and adults learn a foreign/second language in the same way.
- Adults have a longer concentration span compared to children.
- It is easier to motivate children.
- Teachers of young learners need less training.

Statements are adapted from:

**Young children learn languages better**

“This is commonly held view, based on many people’s experience seeing children transplanted to a foreign language environment and picking up the local language with apparent ease... The reason for children’s apparently speedy learning when immersed in the foreign environment may be the sheer [total] amount of time they are usually exposed to the language, the number of teachers surrounding them, and the dependence on (foreign-language-speaking) people around to supply their needs (survival motive).

The truth of the assumption that young children learn better is even more dubious if applied to formal classroom learning: here there is only one teacher to a number of children, exposure time is very limited, and the survival motive does not usually apply. Moreover, young children have not as yet developed the cognitive skills and self-discipline that enable them to make the most of limited teacher-mediated information; they rely more on intuitive acquisition, which in its turn relies on a larger volume of comprehensible input than there is time or in lessons.” (Ur, 1996, pp. 286-7)

**Foreign language learning at school should start early**

“Some people have argued for the existence of a ‘critical period’ in language learning: if you get too old and pass this period you will have significantly more difficulty learning; thus early learning in schools would seem essential. But this theory is not conclusively supported by research evidence... if you have limited number of hours to give to foreign language teaching in school, it will probably be rewarding in terms of sheer [total] amount of learning to invest these in the older classes... Snow claim[s] that 12 is the optimum age for starting a foreign language in school; my own experience is that ten is about right... an early start to language learning is likely to lead to better long-term results... In a situation, where there are as many teachers and teaching hours as you want, by all means start as early as you can” (Ur, 1996, pp. 287)
Children and adults learn languages in the same way

“Adults’ capacity for understanding and logical thought is greater, they are likely to have developed a number of learning skills and strategies which children do not yet have. Moreover, adult classes tend on the whole to be more disciplined and cooperative- as anyone who has moved from teaching children to teaching adults, or vice versa, will have found. This may be partly because people learn as they get older to be patient and put up with temporary frustrations in the hope of long-term rewards, to cooperate with others for joint profit and various other benefits of self-restraint [self-control] and disciplined cooperation. Another reason is that most adults are learning voluntarily, have chosen the course themselves, often have a clear purpose in learning (work, travel, etc.) and are therefore likely to feel more committed and motivated; whereas most children have little choice in where, how or even whether they are taught.” (Ur, 1996, pp. 287-8)

Adults have a longer concentration span

Teachers commonly notice that they cannot get children to concentrate on certain learning activities as long as they can get adults to do so. However, the problem is not the concentration span itself- children will spend hours absorbed in activities that really interest them- but rather the ability of the individual to persevere with something of no immediate intrinsic interest to them. Here older learners do exhibit noticeable superiority, because they tend to be more self-disciplined. One implication for teaching is the need to devote a lot of thought to the (intrinsic) interest value of learning activities for younger learners.” (Ur, 1996, pp. 288)

It is easier to motivate children

“In a sense, this is true: you can raise children’s motivation and enthusiasm (by selecting interesting activities) more easily than that of older, more self-reliant and sometimes cynical [suspicious] learners. On the other hand, you can also lose it more easily: monotonous, apparently pointless activities quickly bore and demotivate young learners: older ones are more tolerant of them. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that younger learners’ motivation is more likely to vary and is more susceptible to immediate surrounding influences, including the teacher; that of older learners tent to be more stable.” (Ur, 1996, pp. 288)

Teachers of young learners need less training

“In many societies, teaching children is seen as an extension of mothering rather than as an intellectual enterprise. Teachers at primary level are then often given less training, lower status, and lower pay, than their colleagues in the same educational system who teach teenagers or adults... the teachers of children need to be highly skilled to reach into children’s worlds and lead them to develop their understandings towards more formal, more expensive and differently organized concepts. Primary teachers need to understand how children make sense of the world and how they learn; they need skills of analysing learning tasks and of using language to teach new ideas to groups and classes of children. Teaching languages to children needs all the skills of the good primary teacher in managing children and keeping them on task, plus knowledge of the language, of language teaching, and of language learning.” (Cameron, 2001, p. xii)
Children only need to learn simple language and simple topics

“...is also misleading to think that children will only learn simple language, such as colours and numbers, nursery rhymes and songs, and talking about themselves. Of course if that is all they are taught, that will be all they can learn. But children can always do more than we think they can; they have huge learning potential, and the foreign language classroom does them a disservice if we do not exploit that potential... Children need more than ‘simple’ language in the sense that only ‘simple’ topics are covered. Children are interested, or can be interested, in topics that are complicated (like dinosaurs and evolution), difficult (like how computers work), and abstract (like why people pollute the environment or commit crimes)”. (Cameron, 2001, p. xii-xiii)

Children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates.

Children show variations in their social/emotional, moral, cognitive, physical developments. Also, “a specific child does not develop in all areas at the same rate” (Linse, 2005, p.5). In order to provide young learners with appropriate learning experiences and to tailor language instruction, the teachers should be familiar with and aware of their young learners. For this reason, they may observe the children in in-class and out-of-class activities to see how they interact with other students in group/pair work activities and work individually; engage in conversations with them; ask them about their interests and needs; and examine their drawings, writings and belongings (i.e.: toys). (Linse, 2005)

Children who learn a language before adolescence are much more likely to have native-like pronunciation.

Studies show that children starting learning a second language before puberty are more likely to have a native-like accent. This depends on some factors: First, the children should be exposed to enough and relevant language input in the natural second language environment from native-speakers at early ages. Second, the exposition should be before puberty (until 10-12 years of age), before the plasticity of the brain is lost. Third, “children often seem less embarrassed than adults at taking a new language” (Cameron, 2001, p.1), which may also help them receive a more native like accent. However, there are some exceptions of EFL speakers who acquired a native-like accent even they have never been to an English-speaking country or have started learning English long after they reach puberty.

While discussing whether these statements are myths or facts, keep in mind the difference between ESL and EFL contexts, and that between acquisition and instructional learning.
Jean Piaget: Constructivism

- He aims to find out how children function in the world that surrounds them and how this influences their development.
- The child continually interacts with the things in his/her environment himself/herself and tries to solve the problems around, through which learning occurs: The more the problems, the more and better the learning.
- **Assimilation**: action takes place without any change to the child (fork as spoon)
- **Accommodation**: the child adjusts to the new possibility (fork as fork)
- **4 developmental stages**: sensory motor (0-2); pre-operational (2-7); concrete operational (7-11); formal operational (11-...)
- **Problem of his theory**: The child is in his own world not in communication with the others: Environment provides
- Piaget neglects the society.
- **Foreign Language Learning**: children can construct their own knowledge working with objects and ideas, and they can make sense of others’ actions and language by bringing their own experience and knowledge. The developmental stages should be kept in mind.

Lev Vygotsky: Social Constructivism

- He gives importance to language and other people in the child’s world/environment.
- Child’s development in the first language helps his/her cognitive development, as language works as a new tool for the child to construct meaning, to organize information (talking to themselves).
- Child is an active learner in a world full of other people.
- **Zone of Proximal Development**: ZPD shows the difference between current knowledge and adult guided potential knowledge. It is not what a child can do alone but what she can do with skilled help from an adult or older person.
- Learning to do things and learning to think are both helped by interacting with an adult. The child first does things in social context with other people, and gradually shifts away from reliance on others to independent action and thinking.
- **Foreign Language Learning**: Teacher is there to support and to model the language and then language is transformed and internalized to become part of the individual child’s language skills and knowledge.
Jerome Bruner: Scaffolding & Routines

- Language is an important tool for cognitive growth.
- **Scaffolding**: It is the talk that supports a child to carry out an activity. Care-taker talk is simplified and fine-tuned to help the child understand. The parents, through scaffolding, may grab the attention of their child to the task, simplify the task, keep them on track to complete the task, show other ways of doing the task, and control the child’s frustration. Similarly, the teacher talk should also be simplified and fine-tuned according to the level and age of the children. Both in in-class and out-of-class activities, the teachers may simplify a language task and support the child to keep him/her on that task, to demonstrate/model useful strategies to complete a task or to encourage young learners use language to interact with others.

Scaffolding (shoes)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uNysJ8xOxLE&feature=related

Scaffolding in Language Teaching
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lmJoOjLQM3U&NR=1

- **Formats and Routines**: Since the child is familiar with the formats and routines, they feel the security of familiarity and they make sense of the language through familiar experiences. Bedtime stories are the examples of how parents follow routines. The classroom routines not only help language development as the children predict meaning and intention through familiarity of the event but also contribute to the management of the classroom.

Hello song:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8I9gz-5_h60&feature=fvwrel

Reference List