

# Issues in English Language Teaching in Primary Schools

Tom Hunter, an English Language Specialist from the College of St. Mark and St. John in Plymouth, has written this article on language acquisition in young children. Working with UK partners and the UK's Department for International Development, the British Council supports the development of primary English language teaching in Bangladesh.

The worldwide trend towards teaching English to ever younger children has resulted in a growing emphasis on primary school ELT. This trend, however, has created a number of problems which raise important issues. These issues can be classified as psychological, developmental and methodological.

## Psychological issues

Psychological issues revolve around whether language is learned or acquired, or a little of both. Discussion draws on the work of Krashen, Ellis and others in the area of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), and suggests that the process of knowing a language is a largely unconscious process which is natural to all human beings. (On the other hand, "learning" is conscious, requires effort and resources, and might involve a teacher). SLA theory does not claim parity with first language acquisition, but suggests that in "getting" another language there is probably more acquiring than learning going on.

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Among primary school children, it is likely that acquiring language more closely represents the process by which they are getting to grips with a second language, than learning a language. Children at this age are just not capable of the sophisticated cognitive processes implicit in formal language learning. This capability, as far as can be judged, develops between the ages of 11 and 13. It



therefore seems more appropriate for language lessons in the primary school to focus on acquisitional features rather than formal learning. The same may not be true at the secondary level where the evidence suggests that adolescents and young adults have a great capacity for the behavioural and cognitive

processes of learning as explicit and conscious activity.

## Developmental

As alluded to above, education at the primary school level has more to do with human development than with the imparting of knowledge. To a young child between the ages of 6 and 8, formation of understanding

of the world around such notions as Time, Distance, Place Location etc. are as much linguistic notions as they are mathematical notions. Indeed a child makes no distinction between maths and language in the way that a school timetable might. The two are indistinguishable and interdependent. This suggests that the development of a second language, at the primary level needs to have a more integrated place in the programme.

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## Methodological

Young children learn by doing. Play is work. Intuition, imagination, creativity and wonder are all forces at work in the

young mind. The core principles of all learning in the primary school apply equally to the teaching of a second language, that is, a need for methodology that engages the whole person in the learning process, which builds on the world of the child (fantasy, stories, songs etc.) and which encourages learning by discovery.

## Conclusion

English language teaching in the primary school differs significantly from that in the secondary school in 3 fundamental ways: young learners acquire rather than learn language, young learners are not cognitively developed to cope with the complexities of traditional language teaching and young learners respond to child-centred, discovery learning approaches.

