Familiarising Children with English by Ramanajam Meganathan

By RAMANUJAM MEGANATHAN | Nov 13, 2015

Let us question ourselves. How should I start my English language class with children who begin to learn the language? Some responses could be:

- I will begin with letters of the alphabet A/a, B/b, C/c, D/d, E/e…
- I will make children to write first
- I will show the letters first then…..
- I will find mother tongue equivalents to each letter of alphabet.

Now could you please write how you would begin your first English lesson? (this is for your self-reflection)

The above dilemmas are always there with every teacher as also of every language acquisition researcher or an expert. How did we learn or any one learn his / her mother tongue? All of us would give an answer that that language is there around the child from the day s/he was born. In fact the (mother tongue) language is in the child. The child hears the language from the day of his / her birth and its understanding of the spoken word grows from day to day. By the time the child reaches the age of three s/he speaks his/her mother tongue well and one can get engaged a conversation with the child on a subject of her familiarity i.e. about her surrounding, things s/he knows, etc. How is it possible when no one has ever taught the language? It is because

1. The child got his/herself familiarised with the language through oral means.
2. No one introduced her to letters of the alphabet first then to words and then sentences...
3. They hear people speaking, associated with something to understand and then attempt to speak.

HEARING COMES FIRST TO ANY CHILD IN LEARNING THE LANGUAGE

If this is true in the case of mother tongue, the same must be true for any number of languages children are exposed to learn. So let us ensure oral introduction to the language before they are made to read and write. Language is primary a means of communication by speech, a means which is extended by reading and writing. The billion dollar question would be, How to begin orally? And how long this oral only approach should go on?
Having agreed to introduce English orally first to our learners, you feel that the learners need to see and speak. There is no time frame for how long the ‘only oral exposure’ should continue, may be for short period. **THE ORAL EXPOSURE IS PREPARATORY FOR TAKING THE LEARNER INTO USING ENGLISH, THE SKILLS OF THE LANGUAGE.**

Let’s reflect:

How should I introduce English orally to my students?

- By introducing the letter of the alphabet
- Or words
- Or a set of words / phrases
- Complete sentences
- Rhymes, songs, stories

Let us see how it could be done as [L.R.H. Chapman (1960)](1960) and other language leaning exponents of recent times tell us

- Children should HEAR the language for a short time before they SEE it, so that they may concentrate on listening to new (strange) sounds....
- Children should begin at once to use the language in SPEECH. This the teacher should ensure very carefully letting children imitate, reproduce, stumble, commit errors and speak only half of the expected word / phrase / sentence. Children should be allowed to try naturally.
- The first words which learners see in printed or written form should those they have already heard and understood. The words / phrases should be objects, actions, events and ideas from their day-to-day life. **LIFE IN THE CLASSROOM SHOULD CONNECT THE LIFE OUTSIDE IT** so that children can easily contextualise their learning.

**Why ‘Hearing’ first?**

We keep saying that beginners should HEAR the language for short time before they SEE it. What should they hear and speak, before they see it and when they see it (the language) how it should be done?

**Words and structures**

Teacher knows the familiar words of things, places and persons that children know in their contexts in their language from their life experiences. Teacher also knows what is foreign or strange that children cannot connect with their previous knowledge and experiences. Use (English) words of things, places, and persons from the life of children. The pictures of objects should be shown and the words are heard by children. Use concrete and countable things, not abstract and uncountable nouns. Textbooks will have such things in the beginning. Let us see how this could be done

What is this? A book
This is a book.
Is this a ......? Yes or No
Have I a book? Yes or No
Has he a book? Yes or No.
Has Geetali a book? Yes or No.
I have a book.
You have contrast structures like
This is a book. That is a table.
This is a pencil. That is a pen.

**Using children’s previous knowledge**

Children know at least one language and have their experience so far (three to four years) when they enter school. They speak a language and understand things, objects and persons around them. Second language learning, for that matter any learning, should use the learners previous knowledge and connect their life experiences with the learning of new language or subject, it would be a natural process and effective for learning.

It will be difficult for a child in Assam to understand the word ‘dessert’ and how a camel lives. But it is quite natural for same child to
understand easily the words 'tea' 'rain' 'cow' 'buffalo' Our lessons to beginners should use such words, phrases, names, experiences from the lives of children.

1. This is a
   - cat.
   - cow.

2. This is a
   - buy.
   - woman.

3. This is a
   - tree.
   - bird.

4. That is a
   - goat.
   - fish.

The plural 's'.
The teachers can go easily to plurals by using the same words and structures.
   - This is a book. These are books.
   - This is a pencil. These are pencils.

Action Exercises
- Stand up, sit down, come here, open the door, shut the window, clean the blackboard, etc.
- The meaning of these instructions can be shown quite clearly by gestures, and there is no need for translating into mother tongue.
- This is my nose. This is my head. This is my hand. This exercise could be done as a whole class activity following the teacher. Both the teacher and children pointing to their heads or noses, holding up hand and pointing to it with the other, as they say the sentences. Let teacher should start the exercise but then remain silent, merely indicating the feature he wishes to be named.
- I have two hands, eyes, ears. Children hold up their hands, point to their eyes and touch their ears.

Rhymes and Songs
I hear thunder.
Hark! Don't You?
Pitter-patter, raindrops

There are many values in simple action exercises. They provide ear-training and speech practice. They allow some variety in these early lessons, when the lesson-content is necessarily so small there is no danger of a loss of interest.

From hearing to listening
Ear training is an unconscious process going on in almost every moment of the lesson, but it needs a more conscious addition which can be given in this way. Let us see how this can be bilingual.
The teacher says the words and phrases in English, the class listens and then given the mother tongue equivalent. Choose words, phrases or sentences very carefully.
1. a box – books; a pen – a pin; my hand – your hand; my hand – your head;
2. a key-keys; a chair – two chairs; a watch-watches
In each pair of words, especially the first two pairs, the ability to distinguish by ear between the different sounds needs patient training.

Ponder over
- Children HEAR the language before they see it. As they hear they need to start speaking it.
- Children understand things, ideas, experiences that they already have. SO CONNECT THEIR PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE WITH THE EXPERIENCE IN THE CLASSROOM.
From ‘Hearing’ to ‘Seen’ English

We know very well that letters of the alphabet of our (Indian) languages are different from English. We need to familiarise our children with the appearance before they are taught the formation of the English letters. How should it be done? Do you have any guesses or clues. Let us discuss and do it.

How can we familiarise our children with the appearance of the letters of alphabet of English?

- By teaching them to write strokes first
- Then teaching the formation of a-A, b-B, c-C, .......
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When children begin to see English, it has those words that they are orally familiar with and those words of names that they know in their real life situations. So let children see the known words written on the blackboard by the teachers, words cards (either printed or drawn).

How to make use of word cards?
The word cards contain picture and the word already orally heard by children. We need to be very careful when we introduce children to see English. Though we intend to introduce a particular word to children, say for example the word, a cat or a book, we actually say in a structure. Say it like this

This is a CAT. What is it?
The children, it is expected, would say either ‘cat’ or This is cat.

This is how oral and seen English are integrated.

The following words cover all the letters of English alphabet:

A pen, a pin, a book, a cat, a key, my hand, walls, window (to show the plural ‘s’), up, down (with arrows indicating the two directions), red green (in the appropriate colours), five (for the letter ‘v’), the door, the table (for the definite article), a fish, a jug (for ‘j’), the queen (for ‘q’), lazy (for ‘z’).

It is important that from the beginning children should hear and say (and see) teacher saying and they too saying or seeing ‘a book’, ‘a pen’, ‘a key’, etc. Teacher can translate or ask children to do the same. But DO NOT TRANSLATE EVERYTHING AND EVERYTIME.

A Word Chart

When all the letter of the alphabet have been introduced in words, a chart can be made and displayed, containing words using the whole alphabet. Ensure that children know letters and know to associate the sound with the alphabet.

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An alphabet Chart

[Image of an alphabet chart with various words starting with different letters.]

No. 1 of 12 English charts
Time has now come to systematise knowledge of the alphabet, so the word chart can be replaced by full fledged alphabet chart. The alphabet chart is displayed with letters of the alphabet followed by the letter is use in a word. Let children have ample opportunities to see the letters and their use in words.

**Structure Cards**
Children have now been familiarised with the sounds of the letters orally and have seen them and are in a position to write. Let us spend some more time in introducing simple structures to children so that their familiarity with the language gets strengthened. Structure cards will be of much use for the purpose.

1. What is this? It is a ……
2. What is that?
3. Is this a dog? Yes, it is a dog. No, It is not a dog
4. Are you…….? Yes, I am. No, I am not.
5. Where is the ……..?
6. What are you doing?

**Reading by sight**
Now we can introduce in a limited way seeing of words which have not been heard and whose meanings are not known. Since English is not a phonetic language, it will be of much use if preparatory training for reading is given to children. Minimal pairs and their associations could be established.

- Pen: changed to hen, ten, men.
- Cat: changed to fat, rat, hat.
- Pin: changed to tin, thin,
- Door: changed to poor, floor.

**Let us reflect:** Could you now say ways to familiarise children with English?

**Handwriting:** Teaching to learning to write

**Scribbling to writing**

Scribbling is essential and important for hand-eye coordination. We should allow both at home and in school scribbling by children. Scribbling on the wall, on the floor and slate makes them develop hand-eye coordination. Handwriting, as we know well, should not be taught first. Let children get familiarised with the language through words and simple
Teacher demonstration is very important here. The teachers having introduced the language to children, now has to again contextualise the words in which the letters occur. The following steps are suggested. This is known to every one. The teachers demonstrates

- the starting-point of the stroke,
- the direction of the stroke, that is, from top to bottom, or from left to right, and
- the number of strokes or movements which form each letter.

(e.g. a, p, n – two movements each, c, e, one movement each)

**From drawing to writing**

When introduced or beginning to write, children actually draw. This needs to be made into writing, learning to write. So let us enable children write the letter in words. As given earlier somewhere we can see all the alphabets are covered in the following words. pen, a pin, a book, a cat, a key, my hand, walls, windows, up, down, red, green, five, the door, the table, a fish, a jug, the queen, lazy.

Now the questions are

- Which should be introduced first, lower case or upper case?
- Children have heard and seen letters mostly in lower case.
- In the word cards and structure they have seen both- some lower case, some upper case.
- Am I not confusing children when I introduce both?

Answers to above are not easy and there is no one single solution. Let us recall children have heard the language and seen it. They are familiar with words and some structures. They have seen mostly lower case and some upper case.

I feel both can be introduced simultaneously, but with the letter in use in a word. The alphabet chart could be prepared and displayed for the whole class. You can now see how things can be shown to children. You can see below how a child scribbled and the movement from scribbling to drawing.
to be continued