

In search of an approach

Millions of children are learning English in Asia, and thousands of teachers are searching for an approach to teaching that will work most effectively. Yet, there is very little theory and research on how to teach Asian elementary school children. Standard international approaches can certainly help us, but we need to think carefully about which aspects of these approaches are appropriate for our own particular teaching situations.

FINDING AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH

It is time for each of us to build an approach that fits the particular needs of Asian elementary school children learning English as a foreign language.

EFL in Asia

The teaching techniques we use in one kind of situation may be very different from those we use in another situation. It is often surprising how a technique that appears “obviously right” when we are teaching children who have moved from Thailand to Canada, fails to work well when we teach children of the same age in Thailand. There are few universally correct methods, and yet, because the teaching of English to children in Asia is still in its infancy in many respects, techniques designed for different situations have often been imported and assumed to be appropriate.

One of the most important distinctions to be aware of is that between **ESL** and **EFL**. ESL (English as a Second Language) refers to the learning of English by immigrants to a country where English is the native language. For example, a Korean child who has moved to Australia with her family is an ESL learner in her English class. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) refers to the learning of English by students in a country where English is not the native language. In most cases, the children are learning at high school, university, or a language school in their own country.

ESL learners generally have more chances to use English naturally outside class, such as while playing with their friends, shopping, or surviving in daily life. They are also likely to have much more exposure to English, such as when watching TV or just hearing conversations around them. In general, they are more likely to deeply understand the importance of English and feel it is natural and necessary to learn it. EFL learners, on the other hand, rarely feel it is either natural or

necessary to learn English. Adults may have told them English is important, but unless they are in an environment where there is a lot of English around them, they are unlikely to feel a deep emotional need for the language.

This is particularly true in the Asian countries for which this book has been written. Not only is there little exposure to English in the children's daily lives, but their native languages also have little in common with English, and have different writing systems. Under these circumstances, we need to be careful about using teaching techniques that were originally designed for very different situations, at least not until we have questioned them critically.

Of course, children are children all over the world, so basic theories about how children learn effectively may have just as much relevance in Asia as in North America and Europe, but the classroom application of the insights derived from these theories may be very different. This means a child-centered lesson in an Asian EFL classroom may appear quite different from a child-centered lesson in a French EFL or an American ESL classroom.

■ We need an approach

When observing classes, I often notice various, often contradictory, influences, even within the same lesson. A new language target may be introduced in a teacher-centered way and practiced in a child-centered way. The teacher may try to create a friendly and relaxed atmosphere where children can feel comfortable enough to speak out, but then switch to controlling the class in an authoritarian manner. The teacher may encourage the children to experiment and make mistakes, but then assess them through tests where there are clear right or wrong answers.

It is natural to feel that all approaches to teaching have strong and weak points, and that standard approaches may not fit our particular teaching situation, so we need to draw on ideas from a number of different approaches and add ideas that come from our own experience. However, the methods we choose need to fit together coherently.

This is especially important with Asian EFL learners. Our students are learning a language that feels very different from their own, do not use the alphabet in their own language, and may not deeply understand why they are learning English in the first place. If we want the children to adopt a positive and active approach to learning with a clear sense of direction, our courses, and each individual lesson within these courses, need an underlying consistency.

We need to develop a general approach based on our views on how children learn most effectively, and then teach, manage, and assess the children in ways that are consistent with this approach. Of course, we will never really know

exactly how children actually do learn most effectively, so we need to examine and question our approach as we go along, and steadily, and sometimes radically, modify our classroom practice accordingly.

■ Starting from established approaches

If we decide to form our ideas by looking at established approaches to how children learn, we find there are various different approaches and opinions to choose from. Some are compatible with each other but others are diametrically opposed to each other. An added complication is that some approaches that are dominant in western educational psychology may have less validity when used as a starting point for understanding how to teach English to children in Asia.

However, it is important to understand some of the most recognized approaches, and think about which aspects of each approach we agree with or disagree with. Many teaching methods that we may regard as “normal,” have, in fact, been heavily influenced by one or more of these approaches. For example, many teacher-centered methods have been influenced by **behaviorist** psychology, and the various child-centered ways of teaching can often be traced to the views of **humanistic** and **constructivist** psychologists.

There is really no such thing as a “normal” way of teaching. There are many theories and approaches to choose from, and by looking at some of these ideas critically, we can search for what we believe is true, or at least, appropriate for us in our own teaching situation. The main approaches are outlined below, and each approach is followed by questions that will help you in your search for an approach that works for you. If you are an experienced teacher of children, these questions will ask you to reflect on your current teaching methods and style. If you have just begun to teach children, the questions should help you think about some of the fundamental issues involved in teaching children. In Chapter 11, A child-centered approach for Asia, each of these questions will be examined in greater detail from the point of view of the approach taken in this book.

INFLUENTIAL APPROACHES

Many approaches have had an influence on the way EFL is taught. Sometimes this influence has been clear and specific, and sometimes it permeates almost every aspect of a lesson.

■ Behaviorist approaches

The behaviorist view focuses on the reinforcement of behavior through repetition and rewards. In the classroom, this has tended to imply that children should be regarded as blank slates until they are taught by more knowledgeable adults. A lesson influenced by this approach generally contains some or all of the following five elements:

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- The teacher is clearly in control both of the children's behavior and of the learning process. The children respond to the teacher's directions and stimuli and tend to passively follow the teacher.
- The teacher has a clear lesson plan and step-by-step syllabus.
- English patterns are repeated through drills and choral repetition until they become automatic.
- It is considered essential for the children to succeed as much as possible. They are protected from making errors.
- Success is reinforced by praise and rewards.

Questions to consider

1. How important is it to control the children's behavior?
2. Is it important to make a careful plan before starting a lesson?
3. Is it best to have a step-by-step syllabus?
4. Are repetition drills important?
5. Should we try to prevent children from making mistakes?
6. Are rewards and praise important?

■ Input approaches

Input approaches focus on the input of language from the teacher, from tapes, or from reading material. A lesson is generally influenced by some or all of the following basic principles:

- We should expose the children in our classes to English they can understand at present or that is just beyond their present level.
- They should not be expected to produce new words and patterns until they feel ready to do so.
- We can introduce new words and patterns through physical demonstration, and we should encourage the children to be physically active.

Questions to consider

1. To what extent should we try to control the new words and patterns the children encounter in our lessons?
2. If Asian EFL learners are not expected to produce new words and patterns until they feel completely comfortable in doing so, can we expect them to speak out and be communicative?
3. What do you feel are the benefits of using gestures and physical activity in a lesson?

■ Theory of multiple intelligences

The theory of multiple intelligences claims that children can be intelligent in different ways. The following basic principles have had a significant influence on the way children are taught:

- One child may be more intelligent in one way, and another child may be more intelligent in another. One form of intelligence should not be considered superior to another kind of intelligence.
- We should try and find the strengths of each child and encourage and build on these strengths. For example, one child may learn best through drawing or playing with pictures, others through listening to or singing songs.

Questions to consider

1. Do you agree that different children tend to be intelligent in different ways? If so, is it helpful to try and find which categories of intelligence each child tends to be most proficient in?
2. How is it possible to teach a class of children, each of whom may learn most effectively in different ways?
3. What do you think may influence the ways in which a child is intelligent? Are they mainly fixed at birth, or heavily influenced by teachers, parents, and friends?

CHILD-CENTERED APPROACHES

The key influences on the child-centered approach taken in this book are humanistic and constructivist.

■ Humanistic approaches

Humanistic approaches stress the importance of the inner thoughts and feelings of each learner, and aim to help children reach their full potential as “whole”

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people as they learn. A lesson influenced by these approaches generally contains some or all of the following elements:

- The children are encouraged to develop people-to-people skills such as cooperation, fairness, and consideration for others.
- The focus is on learning as a process rather than on immediate results.
- The lessons allow each child to make her own choices and proceed at a pace that suits her best.
- The children are emotionally immersed in the lesson.
- Motivation is considered to come from inside, not from external reward.
- The emphasis is on learning English in natural context rather than breaking it up into discrete parts.
- The teacher ensures the children feel as little anxiety as possible.
- The teacher is a “facilitator” who steps back and encourages children to learn “naturally.”

Questions to consider

1. Do you think it is important for children to develop themselves as “whole” people as they learn English? If so, how can we encourage this?
2. Is it more important to focus on the way children learn rather than on short-term results?
3. Should we give the children opportunities to choose what to learn?
4. To what extent should the children be emotionally immersed in our lessons?
5. To what extent should we depend on rewards to motivate?
6. Should the emphasis be on learning English in a natural context?
7. Is it always important to reduce the anxiety the children feel in our lessons?
8. Should we step back and help children learn, or should we become more involved than this?

■ Constructivist approaches

Constructivist approaches focus on the child as an individual trying to make sense of the world in which she finds herself. Constructivism embraces a wide variety of theories and approaches, but it is possible to identify some principles that have had a significant influence on the application of constructivist ideas in the classroom:

- Each child is an active explorer who is constructing a mental model of how she thinks English fits together.
- A child tests theories and makes guesses about new English words and patterns she encounters, adjusting her theories when necessary.
- All children are active learners, but they choose which directions to move in. A child tends to move in directions that have personal meaning, and avoids situations she thinks will lead to failure.
- If a child experiences mental conflict with new information, she stands more chance of learning it deeply and being able to use it actively.
- A child has the potential to reach beyond her present level within a certain zone. Left to herself, she will not be able to reach into this zone. She needs to interact with adults and with children who have more knowledge than her in order to do so.
- We do not learn language in order to communicate. First, we try to communicate, and in the attempt, we learn language.

Questions to consider

1. Do you agree that each of the children is constructing an individual mental model of how she thinks English works? If so, what consequences does this have on the way we should teach?
2. How can we encourage children to make more guesses?
3. Do you agree that all children are active learners? If so, why do some children appear to lack motivation?
4. How can we interact with the children more?
5. Is it true that children learn English most effectively by first trying to communicate and then discovering the words and patterns they need to do so, rather than by first learning a word or pattern and then practicing how to use it?

A PAUSE TO REFLECT

■ A child-centered approach for Asia

In order to teach children most effectively, we first need to look closely at how children learn most effectively. Some children in our classes may appear to succeed and others may not, but could many more succeed if we more deeply understood how to help them learn? If so, then here is our greatest challenge as teachers: to try and solve the mystery of how children learn, and use this understanding to motivate and enrich the learning experience of each of the children in our classes.

However, this is no easy task. As this chapter has shown, there are many views on how children learn. Do children learn because adults explain things to them? Do they learn best when they are relaxed and feel no anxiety? Do they learn because it is in their nature to try and make sense of this world in which they find themselves?

The child-centered approach taken in this book is largely based on constructivist and humanistic ideas that have been adapted to the needs of Asian EFL learners. In the course of the next ten chapters I will try to build a coherent and detailed model of a child-centered approach that is appropriate for teaching elementary school children in Asia, and give examples of the practical applications of these ideas in the classroom. This model may or may not stand the test of time, but the debate and discussion it generates should further the search for an effective child-centered approach for Asia.

In the final chapter, I will return to the theories and approaches outlined above, look at them in greater depth, and show how they concur or contrast with the ideas presented in this book.

Some questions to reflect on or discuss:

- 1 Which of the approaches mentioned in this chapter may have had the most influence on your own ideas about teaching?
- 2 Which of these approaches do you hope will have more influence on your teaching in future?
- 3 What factors are particularly important to consider when developing an approach for Asian children?