

## Sample extract from the Teaching English to Young Learners Course.

### Young learners compared with older learners

Children grow fast and so, of course, there are significant differences between children at the age of 5 and children at the age of 8. Very young children do not distinguish clearly between fact and fiction, for example, and they can get so involved with a story that they can cry, or perhaps jump up and down with excitement. Older children can recognise that a story is separate from life, and so even if they enjoy it they will not get emotionally and physically involved in the way that younger children might do. For teachers, one significant difference between older and younger children is their attention span; younger children will find it difficult to concentrate for long and so a teacher must plan for many relatively short activities.

#### TASK 3

Before you read on, make a list of at least four ways in which young learners differ from older learners.

In what ways are young learners different from older learners? There are a number of significant ways.

1. Young learners lack the self-consciousness of older learners and so they are very happy to try out the new language. The great majority are willing to try out new language whether or not they make mistakes, and whether or not their pronunciation is appropriate. This willingness to use the language means that they generally get far more practice than adults and so their skills improve significantly faster. You may have experienced this on holidays abroad with children who are sent off to buy things in shops by adults who are too embarrassed by their own language skills to 'have a go'. The adults' knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of the new language may be far better than their children's but they may be far less willing to try them out.
2. Young learners generally have brilliant memories and so they can pick up new language very much more easily than older learners. However, adults may have far better learning strategies that can compensate for this to some degree.
3. Young learners are totally disinterested in rules and form and only want to communicate. This strong desire to communicate means that they will be willing to chatter away in a foreign language even when they know only a few sentences and their vocabulary is limited. They will modify the sentences they know to produce

anything that has some resemblance to what they really want to say. They will be unconcerned about word order, agreement or pronunciation but invariably they *will* communicate.

4. If they have adequate exposure to new language, they will absorb language rules without them being explained. This ability to unconsciously sort out the rules of a new language works best where the young learners are immersed in the new language but it can also work to some degree in school if there is adequate input.
5. They learn very quickly and easily through songs and games. Children love playing games in class and are not at all embarrassed by being asked to sing, unlike so many older learners.
6. They learn best when all the language skills are integrated and they also have the chance to touch things, and colour, and draw pictures. Having *hands on* experience of new language is especially important for young learners. When actions are linked to words, they remember far more easily.
7. The younger they are, the shorter their attention span, generally speaking. It is vital that teachers prepare a number of different activities for use throughout their lesson, or their day. Simply asking a pupil to pay attention / concentrate may work with an older learner but may have no effect at all on a young learner. This may not be deliberate refusal by the pupil; it may simply be impossible!
8. Young children love learning where there is a clear context, and where they are actively involved e.g. buying things from a 'shop' in the classroom.
9. They thrive on support and encouragement, although in this they are much like older learners of course!
10. They love having their work put up on the classroom wall and having the chance to take work home to show their parents.

These features of the way that young learners learn mean that teachers should approach teaching young learners in a way that is rather different from that adopted with older pupils (children over 13 years old). The success of classes with young learners will in many ways depend on the teacher being able to adopt an appropriate approach that provides the learners with activities that build on their existing knowledge in an interesting way.

It would also be worth including here a few significant ways in which pupils may be *discouraged* from learning.

1. Young learners need to be in a cheerful and supportive environment. If they feel insecure or under pressure in any way, they will not learn successfully.
2. They prefer a number of short activities rather than activities which continue for a relatively long time. If they become bored they will not learn.
3. They want to learn new language that has relevance to them; they do not want to learn grammar.
4. Young learners will not learn effectively if they are constantly being corrected. Some correction is important from time to time but *over-correction* will be dispiriting for them.



(From *Where there is no artist* by Petra Röhr-Rouendaal, Practical Action Publishing, 2007)

### **The pupils' first-language skills**

Young learners will be relatively fluent in their first language even if they are only about four years old; however, the *extent* of their language skills will still be limited to some degree. They will not have the range of language or intonation patterns that an adult would have and so it would be inappropriate to expect young learners to produce these in a second language. In their first language they will tend to produce chunks of speech (resembling sentences), although these may sometimes be linked together with the linking word *and*.

*We went to the park and we played on the swings and John fell off and he hurt his knee and he started crying and I ran home and told his mother.*

They will not be familiar with embedded clauses (*The policeman, who must have been only 20, quickly stepped in.*) and many other complexities of language, and their speech will tend to follow fairly simple patterns.