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From teaching English to adults to teaching children: the changes that a teacher has to make

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Abstract
This paper will consider the methodological changes that teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) who have been teaching adult learners must make when they have to or wish to teach younger learners, i.e. children. In a social and cultural environment where adjustments in the way (foreign language) teachers work are imperative, the current work will offer a discussion that will analyze both theoretical and practical issues of the matter. On the basis of the consideration of younger and older learner characteristics, the paper will argue that the topic-centered approach, couched within the inter/multi-disciplinary method of teaching, integrated with fun activities may be a suitable and effective way of teaching foreign languages to children.

Keywords: English as a Foreign Language, young learners, adult learners, topic-centered approach, fun activities.

1. Introduction
As early as 1991 Brumfit claimed that EFL teachers of teenagers or adults who wish to work with children need to make important changes in their teaching expectations and methodology. Acknowledging the necessity of this different perspective which is also imposed by the characteristics of our era, this paper will discuss the various changes that EFL teachers have to make when they wish or need to move to teaching children, as well as the parameters they must consider in order to make these changes in an informed and principled way.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 will examine some theoretical considerations which can provide useful insights to EFL teachers, namely theories of cognitive development in children and research findings on age-related differences in foreign language learning. Section 3 will present the characteristics of adults while Section 4 will discuss the characteristics of young learners, as well as the methodological changes that these characteristics dictate. Section 5 will consider the inter/multi-disciplinary, i.e. cross-curricular oriented topic-centered approach and will briefly present a platform for European state schools that is based on this approach and helps teachers implement it in the classroom. Section 6 will provide an overview of how to integrate fun activities in the classroom and Section 7 will conclude the paper summarizing the basic points.

2. How children think and learn
Various theories have attempted to explain children’s cognitive development (see Lightbown & Spada 2000; 2006 for an overview of the various theoretical proposals). For the purposes of this discussion the theories of Piaget and Bruner and the educational implications that these have will be discussed.
According to Piaget, all children pass through a series of stages before they construct the ability to reason in mature ways. Teaching can only influence the course of cognitive development if children are cognitively ‘ready’ to assimilate the concepts they are presented with. Unless this is the case, adult intervention in the form of instruction can lead only to superficial rote learning but not to genuine progress (Wood 1988). According to Shorrocks (1991) the educational implications of the Piagetian view can lead to a degree of inertia on the part of teachers as they may feel that they cannot change an internal developmental process and help children develop their mental abilities. Bruner on the other hand, acknowledges the influence of biology in the development of human cognition, but at the same time emphasizes the central role of social interaction, language and instruction in the development of a child’s mind (Wood 1988). His theory is based on the psychological framework of information processing. According to this, humans take in information, store it, retrieve, utilize and transform it into knowledge by means of progressively more sophisticated learning strategies. The teacher’s role within this framework is to make a sensitive intervention in the developmental process by helping children develop an understanding of their own learning strategies and procedures and so move from being a novice to being an expert ‘understander’ (Shorrocks 1991). Crucially, within Bruner’s approach, the role of the teacher with respect to language development is to guide the child with carefully selected linguistic input, a process referred to as ‘scaffolding’ (Cameron, 2001). Bruner describes this process as follows: "Scaffolding refers to the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill s/he is in the process of acquiring (Bruner, 178:19)."

Thus, on the background of recent research in psychology which has lent support to Bruner’s model of cognitive development, teachers not only have the ability but also the obligation to help children develop cognitively. This is a point that EFL teachers of adults moving on to teach children should take into serious consideration when they review their approach. While their adult learners have matured cognitively and are at a stable and end-state with respect to their cognitive development, children are still in the process of such maturation with all the implications that this has for any designed educational intervention.

2.1 The younger the better?

On the assumption that children’s cognition is still underdeveloped and, therefore, younger learners are unable to perceive the world like adults do, we could hypothesize that children faced with a highly complex mental activity like that of learning a foreign language\(^2\) (L2) may encounter more problems and difficulties than adults will.

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1 The notion of ‘scaffolding’ is very close to Vygotsky’s ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ and in some cases the terms are used interchangeably

2 The term ‘foreign language learning’ refers to the process of learning a language other than the language of the community or the language spoken at home, though formal instruction. The term ‘second language acquisition’ refers to the process of language learning in cases of individual or societal bilingualism. However, within the realm of the mentalist perspective on language acquisition (based on the theories of Chomsky and his associates) also extended to foreign language learning whereby the same processes that operate in first language acquisition are also in operation in the learning of another language later in life, the terms can be used interchangeably
Research findings in the area of child-adult differences in second language acquisition (SLA) are hard to interpret and the results are far from conclusive. Thus, the above claim cannot be supported or rejected altogether. According to Krashen, Scarcella & Long (1982) literature in this field allows for two generalizations to be made concerning the effect of age on rate and eventual attainment of L2: i) adults were found to proceed through the early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children and ii) acquirers who begin natural exposure to second languages during childhood generally achieve higher proficiency than those beginning as adults. So, as Krashen, Scarcella & Long pointed out, children appear to be *ultimately* more successful than adults in learning a second language but they are not always faster.

The basic hypothesis behind the widely held view that children may be more successful than adults in learning a foreign/second language is the claim that there is a neurologically based *critical period* for the acquisition of a language which is manifested as innate cerebral flexibility for the processing of speech and language and lasts until early puberty. Elaboration of linguistic input after this critical period is argued to deteriorate (see Lennenberg 1967; Johnson & Newport 1991; Patkowski in press). Much research into L2 acquisition over the last decades has offered support to this view and has attempted to identify the specific areas of language that are subject to maturational effects. Recent studies support that the area of the syntax is particularly vulnerable in L2 acquisition, especially if the L1 and L2 have different syntactic properties with respect to a specific phenomenon (Hawkins & Hattori 2006, Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou 2007, Prentza 2010, 2012, Prentza & Tsimpli in press). Brown (2000) and Larson-Hall (2004) argued that the acquisition of phonemic contrasts, i.e. phonological acquisition, may also be subject to maturational effects: if a contrast feature is not acquired within a critical period the relevant phonemic contrast will not be perceived in the of L2 acquisition of a language which manifests them.

The implication of such proposals is that adult learners of a language will have a biological disadvantage compared to younger children in the task/process of language learning. Findings that adults are more successful than children in the initial stages of acquisition can be related to the fact that language learning does only involve competence, i.e. innate knowledge of a language determined by neurobiological factors, but also performance, i.e. the use of the language in the real world determined by a variety of external factors, skills and abilities. The knowledge of one or more linguistic systems (L1 and other foreign languages) that the adult learners brings into the classroom may, by hypothesis, hinder the acquisition of syntactic structures but may prove valuable as regards the contribution of ready-to-use strategies of language learning, as will also be discussed in the following section.

What the discussion presented so far has indicated is that EFL teachers working with children should perhaps allow for more time in any designed educational intervention than they would allow in an intervention targeting adult learners. However, they should also have in mind that the final results regarding the acquisition of particular structures should be at least comparable with that of adult populations (see also Moon 2005) or even more successful.

Before presenting the characteristics of young learners in more detail, a discussion of the features of adult learners will be provided.
3. Adult Learner Characteristics

Besides the assumed deficit that adult foreign language learners may exhibit, some other features that they have are crucial in the discussion of their differences with younger learner populations. Although the literature provides lengthy lists of differences between younger and order learners, the following paragraphs will attempt to present differences that truly distinguish between the two populations.

Unlike children, adult language learners are goal oriented and direct their learning to fulfill particular needs, for example, professional or academic. Moreover, like children they have different learning styles; some of them prefer the learning styles developed during their school years (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson 1998) while others prefer styles and techniques that proved useful in real-life tasks. In any case, the repertoire of the learning methods that they have at their disposal is larger than that of the children’s.

As mentioned above, adult learners have developed a complete linguistic system in their L1, and potentially know other foreign languages. This means that they have also developed language learning strategies and techniques that children may lack, at least to a great extent. The experience with one or more languages can in principle affect positively meta-linguistic awareness not only at the level of strategies available, but also at the level of linguistic system analysis. In other words, adult learners may be able to ‘notice’ more easily than children how a linguistic system works.

Finally, adopting the view that language aptitude is considered to be a combination of several cognitive factors (working memory, attention span, information processing, phonological coding and decoding) and assuming that cognitive development is complete in adults, but not in children (Robinson 2005), then we would expect that adults may outperform children in certain linguistic tasks.

4. Young Learner Characteristics

Some of the basic characteristics of young learners are: i) they are still developing mentally, ii) they have no real linguistic needs, iii) they learn slowly iv) they are egocentric and better mimics (Clark 1990). All the above differentiate them form adult learners and show the direction towards which EFL teachers should make any relevant adjustments in their teaching. In what follows these characteristics will be discussed in more detail.

Since young children are still developing their mental and cognitive abilities, it is more possible that the EFL teacher will be faced with a class of mixed-ability in terms of cognitive development than if he/she was working with adults. Despite the common to foreign language teachers observation that teaching a foreign language to adults is by no means a situation of class homogeneity, for all the reasons mentioned previously, the divergence that stems from a difference in the stage or state of cognitive development is qualitatively distinct from the divergence on the basis of socio-cultural or individual factors that mainly distinguish one adult learner from another.

Returning to younger learner characteristics, some students may have tremendous limitations on thinking while others may be capable of coping with abstract and complex thinking (Clark 1990). From this naturally follows that a successful approach to teaching...
children could be one that can reconcile these developmental differences. To this end, EFL teachers could consider the use of activities which proceed from the concrete to the abstract or activities designed on the basis of the principles of differentiated learning (see for example Shaul 2011 on differentiated teaching in EFL classrooms).

Moving to the second characteristic, children in most of the cases have no real linguistic needs in the sense that they do not need for whatever reasons to learn a foreign language and cannot see the purpose of doing so. Here, it must be noted that we are not referring to children with an immigrant background or children living in bi/multi-lingual societies or children attending immersion schools. In order to keep children motivated in the way that adults usually are with respect to foreign language learning, the teacher should create a real need and desire to use English (Moon 2000; Vosniadou 2001). This can be achieved through challenging and interesting to the children communicative activities based on the element of fun. All the new technological means with the fascinating environment they can create could also be used towards that direction (see Shetzer & Warschauer 2000).

Moreover, as has already touched upon, children are still developing as thinkers (Slatterly & Willis 2001), they have short attention spans, and, as any teachers knows, a lot of physical energy. These probably show that teachers used to working with adults should not expect to cover as much material in the same period of time as they did with their adult students. Conversely, they might consider adjusting their program to the learning abilities and pace of their young students. Clark (1990) claims that these feature also indicate that L2 teaching and learning could be combined with non-linguistic learning as well: skills, general conceptual development, knowledge of the world, ability to work with others etc. This integration of learning goals can be achieved through the introduction of topic-centered work into the EFL classroom, as will be discussed in section 5.

Another characteristic of children is that they tend to be egocentric, i.e. they see themselves as the center around which the(ir) world evolves. EFL teachers can capitalize upon this egocentricity by relating as much of the content of L2 teaching as possible to children’s everyday life in home and at school. Topics like “my family”, “my home”, “my favorite books” can be used by the EFL teacher in an attempt to personalize language teaching. Notice however, that although this technique is used for the teaching of adults as well, the topics chosen for the children should be as specific, tangible, fun as possible always relating to the physical world, a source of great excitement and learning for the children (Scott & Ytreberg 1990).

The fewer inhibitions and the low affective filter (for details see Dulay, Burt & Krashen 1982) that children exhibit compared to adult learners make them more willing to experiment with the language and imitate new sounds. Since children are better mimics they will be delighted with activities like puns, tongue twisters, rhymes and songs which the EFL teacher should consider integrating in his/her teaching practice.

In addition to the aforementioned features, children also exhibit creative use of the language and tendency to use ‘chunks’ of language, a strong instinct for talk and interaction, a characteristic ability to grasp meaning, an instinct for play and fun and an

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4 Notice that we are not supporting that topic-centered teaching may not be suitable for adults. The point is that its use with adult and children populations may have different reasons and different learning outcomes.
ability to learn through doing (Moon 2000; Vosniadou 2001). These additional characteristics will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

When children communicate, they actively recombine previously taught linguistic items to create new phrases and, in that way, they test out their hypotheses about the rules of the language (trail-and-error procedure). However, children need to feel confident in order to experiment with the language and so EFL teachers need to create a relaxed and secure atmosphere and be supportive when their young pupils talk. Children should be provided with plenty of opportunities to use L2 in different contexts and with activities involving unpredictable and fun language (Faulkner 2011). Games can be very useful in that respect as they create in a playful way the desire to communicate and interact in unpredictable ways (Halliwell 1992; Sugar 1998). Moreover, children often use ‘chunks’ of language that they have noticed in the speech of another person. This is a process that takes place in the acquisition of the children’s mother language, but is also common practice in the acquisition of a foreign language. At first, children tend to use these ‘chunks’ as unanalyzed wholes that help them communicate, but later they are in a position to parse them and understand their structure. Songs, rhymes, poems drama and classroom routines include a variety of such ‘chunks’ of language which can be first learned and then analyzed (Moon 2000; Musarate 2011). In this way, teachers can easily draw children’s attention to underlying grammatical and syntactical rules. Furthermore, children in general enjoy talking and lack adult inhibitions about using a new linguistic code. Halliwell (1992) claims that this is probably the most important attribute that children bring into the classroom. EFL teachers can make this desire to talk facilitate learning by engaging children in interesting activities that focus on communication. Children are good at interpreting the meaning of a situation even though they do not understand the individual words. This is a skill that in which they receive massive practice when they developing their first language. In the case of younger children the process of L1 development is still active and so is the practice in that skill. Children can do that by using their general, albeit in some cases limited, knowledge of the world and any visual or auditory support available. This technique should be encouraged by EFL teachers, as it can be particularly useful for beginner students who have limited knowledge of the linguistic system. Drama, communication games, story-telling and project work can support this natural ability. Accuracy can be focused on later once meaning is established (Moon 2000; Pinter 2006).

Children’s instinct for play and fun (Vosniadou 2001) should be exploited by the EFL teacher in order to create a learning situation where students enjoy themselves, are motivated to participate in the activity, are exposed to language input without focusing on the language itself and have real desire to communicate through the language. An example of such an activity is a chain-game like the following: each child is required to imagine that he/she sees or hears something unusual in the sky when he/she looks through the binoculars and to name it. The rest of the class pretends not to believe the student. The child then gives the binoculars to somebody else inviting them to check for themselves and so the game continues.

Finally, children explore the world through physical activity and appreciate situations by first-hand experience (Scott & Ytreberg 1990). This need for physical movement should not be repressed in the classroom by expecting students to stay sited at all times. Something like that is unlikely to happen, as the EFL teacher new to working with
children will soon find out. This natural tendency can facilitate learning through the use of physical activities like action songs, games, rhymes, drama, making things, perhaps some of the lessons activities. Physical action clarifies the meaning of the words and enhances L2 understanding. In ‘Listen and Do’ activities which basically follow the Total Physical Response method, children are exposed to meaningful input and can demonstrate their understanding of the linguistic code through physical activity without having to respond orally. This process resembles the process of L1 acquisition whereby a child is exposed to his/her mother tongue long before h/she is expected to talk (Freeman 2000).

5. Topic-centered learning

The essence of cross-curricular approach is the assertion that the child’s development should be viewed in a holistic way, targeting at the same time the intellectual, emotional and social aspect of a child’s growth. Schools and teachers must not merely prepare their pupils to respond to specific academic tasks, but give them the ability to achieve their goals, contribute to their communities and continue learning throughout their lives. Therefore, the competencies associated with such a learning are describes as follows: thinking competency (critical thinking, creative thinking, reflective thinking), personal and societal competency (positive personal and cultural identity, personal awareness and responsibility, social awareness and responsibility) and communication competency (language(s) and symbols, digital literacy). (British Columbia, Ministry of Education 2013: 3-4).

The cross-curricular approach has proven to have positive learning effects (see Shetzer & Warschauer 2000) and was embraced with enthusiasm by teachers all over the world. Teachers working with the concept of topic-centered learning do not teach to a timetable strictly divided into periods for different subjects. They base children’s learning to the exploration of a topic (e.g. transport, people, animals) involving a wide range of scientific, creative and/or investigative activities. Topic-centred learning can and should also be related to curricula of other subjects taught at school (Haas 2000). Through this methodology which has gained considerable support in EFL teaching over the years, children can develop their language skills along with relevant core concepts of other subjects by means of meaningful theme-based activities without the focus being on the linguistic aspect alone (Holderness 1991, Beglar & Hunt, 2002; Carless, 2002; Ellis 2003; Littlewood, 2004). As Pinter (2006) also points out, grammar emerges out of meaningful contexts and meaningful communications leads to a focus on grammar.

There are several reasons why this methodological approach is a good candidate for teaching children. Theofilidis as early as 1987, supported that primary school children perceive the word as a whole and so teaching must help the child develop all aspects of learning. Theofilidis also notes that the cross-curricular approach is based on the principles of morphological psychology according to which humans understand things and situations as units characterized by a specific structure and organization and not as groups of unrelated elements. The topic-centred learning methodology also agrees with the principles of student-oriented learning (Ellis, 2003; Nunan 2004; Richards & Rodgers 2001), which have been argued to have positive results for the learning process. As far as
the learning of a second language is concerned, the topic-centered approach provides a clear context which makes learning more meaningful and creates a genuine purpose for learning and using language in the classroom (Holderness 1991). Based on observations like the above, Moon (2000) argued that topic work seems to create many of the conditions that enable children to use their natural learning abilities in foreign language learning.

Topic-centered work can be combined with an activity-based approach that uses children’s instinct for physical activity and their ability to learn through doing. In terms of the practical guidelines that the EFL teacher unfamiliar with this approach should follow, Holderness (1991) summarizes very clearly and in a simple way what one should do: the teacher should choose the topic, identify language skills and devise activities. The teacher should select a topic that appeals to students’ interests, needs, age and abilities. Teachers could ask students which topic they would like to focus on giving them the opportunity to get involved in their learning and so become more autonomous. Teachers can explore the learning potentials of each topic and plan lessons better if they create a topic web of the areas that can be covered by this topic. For example, a topic like transport is related to issues like air, sea, land, space, passengers to mention but a few.

Then the EFL teacher will have to identify linguistic needs and devise activities linked to the topic that can offer practice of the relevant linguistic items or structures. For example, if the topic is “Shapes and Colors” then the teacher can ask children to draw flowers and trees out of different shapes and color them. Afterwards they have to name the different shapes and colors they have used. This topic could also be explored with respect to subjects like geography, physical environment or even history.

The most important criterion for choosing activities is the element of cognitive challenge they involve (Holderness (1991). On this view, the use of open-ended activities, where the outcome is not known and children are required to solve problems using many cognitive skills and resources, is encouraged. An example of such an activity would be the following: ‘Mr. Brown wants to write down fifteen objects starting with the letter ‘b’. Can you help him?’

The topic-centered approach requires careful planning and organization on the part of the teacher especially if h/she has not previously worked with children. However, this approach can have significant learning outcomes if it is effectively implemented in EFL classrooms.

5.1 The case of the eTwinning platform

The eTwinning platform (http://www.etwinning.net/el/pub/index.htm) for European state school teachers provides a learning situation where the teacher and the learners can work on a topic in a cross-curricular way. It is a free and safe platform for teachers to connect, develop collaborative projects and share ideas in Europe. The platform has up to this moment almost 28,500 projects. With respect to the use of the foreign language, the methodology that applies is that of Content and language Integrated Learning (CLIL) since students have to work on a project and present it to their partners from other countries in a foreign language chosen (English, French, German). Besides the theme that the students choose the use of the platform enhances the students’ digital and computer...
literacy as for the presentation of their project and their interaction with their partners they have to use computers and electronic communication tools.

6. The role of fun activities: games, songs, rhymes, stories

Although fun activities are not used in EFL programs for adults or adolescents, they are considered very popular and effective means of teaching primary school children. Thus, an EFL teacher of adults that is expected to work with children should consider including these methods in his/her teaching. However, as the aim is to make informed changes, such activities should not be adopted without a careful examination of the ways in which they can be best used and of the expected learning outcomes.

The advantages of using fun activities can be summarized in the following points: they can ‘lighten’ formal teaching renewing student energy, they can provide indirect practice of language structures, vocabulary and pronunciation, they can improve listening skills, attention and concentration, they can encourage student participation and communication and reveal areas of weaknesses (see Brewster, Ellis & Girad 1992; Ghosn 2002; Moon 2005).

The EFL teacher can easily find online and offline resources of a wide variety of songs suitable for young learners. Action songs and rhymes, limericks and riddles, traditional and pop songs can be used not only for the practice of new grammatical patterns but also for the practice of pronunciation, stress and rhythm, and intonation.

When using games, the teacher can adopt a combination of code-control and communication games. According to Brewster Ellis & Girad (1992) the former aims at accuracy, while the latter at fluency and at the development of communication skills. Different types of games can be adopted at different times to meet students’ linguistic needs. Selecting the game is the first step in planning such an activity. The teacher should also make sure that the instructions are fully understood by children and that the class is organized in groups or pairs according to the demands of the game. During the activity it is important that the teacher monitors the language used by students offering support and feedback where necessary. The above show that games and fun activities in general are not occasional solutions adopted to keep children quite, but should be regularly implemented in the EFL classroom for the right reasons. Since they require a lot of planning and administration time, the language pay-off should be measured against these indexes.

While pre-fabricated items of language can be introduced and consolidated by songs and games like ‘I went to the market and I bought’, language can also be picked up as the result of an enjoyable activity like story-telling (Rixon 1991, 2000; Shue 2008). The Russian folk tale ‘The great Big Enormous Turnip’ including many repetitions is a good example. Rixon also draws teacher’s attention to some activities that allow more creative use of the language as children are given the opportunity to produce new sentences. ‘Find the differences’ is one such activity. Two children have similar but not identical pictures and are asked to cooperate to find five or six differences by asking each other about their own picture. Prepositions, locations, spatial relations or colors can be practiced and communication skills like requests for clarification and repetition can be improved.
7. Conclusion

This paper has discussed the changes in terms of approach and teaching expectations that EFL teachers who have worked with adult learners are expected to make when they have to teach children.

Although this topic is very broad, the basic points analyzed here are the following: Teachers should keep in mind that children are in the process of developing their cognitive abilities and, thus, teaching should not focus only on language but should also reinforce children’s conceptual development. This can be achieved through topic-centered work. Moreover, teachers should use activities that appeal to children’s interests, needs and age. Children should experience language and be able to work with activities that relate to their everyday life. Young Learners must be provided with a variety of opportunities to use language in different contexts and participate in activities that involve authentic and unpredictable language. Fun activities like games, rhymes, songs and stories are particularly useful as they allow children to learn by using their natural characteristics. All these should be done in a relaxed and supportive environment where the focus is the child as a whole. As Brown (2001) has pointed out, a teacher who is willing to explore new ways of teaching English to make it a more enjoyable subject to learn will be greatly rewarded when working with young learners.

Finally, it should be stressed that these points are only some suggestions. Teachers, through experience and familiarity with the child’s world will be able to develop their own understanding of which is the most effective way to teach foreign languages to young learners.

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Brief biography

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