

In the Name of God
the Beneficent the Merciful



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Faculty of Foreign Languages

Department of English

M.A. Thesis

**Teaching English to Iranian Young Learners: A Comparison
between Natural Approach and Audio-Lingual Method**

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بر نتایج مطالعات،
ابتکارات و نوآوری
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موضوع این پایان نامه
متعلق به دانشگاه
اصفهان است.







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and
My Lovely Husband

Abstract

The present study aimed to investigate the progress of EFL young learners in learning English where either Audiolingual method or Natural approach was in use. The focus hence was on the effect of either method on the acquisition of vocabulary as well as communication skills of EFL young learners. It also examined the motivation in the young learners for learning English after the application of the above methods. Further, the study sought the ideas of parents, teachers and schools' head teachers in relation to the methods used. The participants in this study were 80 female Persian speakers learning English, aged between 7 to 9 who were chosen randomly from two elementary schools in Isfahan, where English was taught as an extra-program subject. In one school, English was taught through Audiolingual method and in the other, via Natural approach. All the participants filled in a motivation questionnaire. Moreover, 14 teachers (7 from each school), the head teachers, and 20 parents of the young learners were chosen randomly (10 from each school) to be interviewed. Five full sessions of English classes in each school were observed by the researcher to find out how the teachers employed each method in their teaching and how the young learners used English while learning it. The final test for each group was analyzed for the type of questions included and the young learners' scores on each cluster of items. The results indicated that young learners' improvement in vocabulary learning and communication in Natural approach was significantly better than Audiolingual method. The young learners had the same motivation for learning in both groups. Most of the teachers preferred Natural approach for teaching English to young learners although some of them did not use it due to some limitations imposed on them either by the institute or the parents of the students. The parents were more satisfied with Audiolingual method and the head teachers did not consider any difference in choosing Natural approach or Audiolingual method when teaching English to young learners. They reported similar problems in application of either method.

Key words: Audiolingual method; Natural Approach; Young Learners; Vocabulary Learning; Communicative Language Learning

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Chapter One:

Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter starts with a brief introduction to the study (see 1.2). After that, the problem underlying the present study will be presented (see 1.3.). The significance of the study and the purpose of it will also be provided (see 1.4. and 1.5.). Research questions and hypotheses will be stated after that (see 1.6.). Definition of the key terms and the structure of the present study will be provided at last (see 1.7 and 1.8).

1.2. Introduction

According to the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967), language acquisition must occur early in life if native- like mastery is to be achieved. Somewhere within the critical period (the border often taken to be puberty), performance begins to decline with increasing age of acquisition. After the critical period has passed, age of acquisition is no longer supposed to have an effect, and native-like performance is no longer supposed to be achievable (Birdsong, 2005). People who learn a second language

(L2) later in life generally perform more poorly on tests of L2 grammar than native speakers or early acquirers (For review, see DeKeyser & Larson-Hall, 2005). For example, poorer performance by late L2 learners has been repeatedly shown using oral and written grammaticality judgment tasks. On such tasks, late L2 learners are much more likely to accept ungrammatical sentences as grammatical than native speakers or early L2 learners (Birdsong & Molis, 2001; DeKeyser, 2000; McDonald, 2000). Such data have been taken as support for the biologically based Critical Period Hypothesis of language acquisition.

The general belief, “younger equals better”, has caused the teaching of English to expand into primary school settings all around the world (Yildirim & Ueker, 2004). Rixon (1999) suggests that two of the main reasons why countries make this decision are (i) to take advantage of benefits that are connected with the importance of English and (ii), to take advantage of benefits that derive from the nature and needs of children.

Learning is an everyday experience for everyone but perhaps most obviously for young children who rapidly acquire new behaviors, language, facts, concepts, and ideas. (Bartsch, K., Horvath, K., Estes, D., 2003). The importance of children’s English education has been widely recognized in countries where English is learned as a second or a foreign language.

Cheung (2002) divides young learners into three groups:

- 1) The very young learners, 2) average young learners, and 3) early teen learners. The very young learners are those who are aged 7 years old and less. They are very limited on vocabulary and have not even acquired the grammar of their mother tongue. These children have short attention span, so that they easily get bored with the lesson. Methods that are appropriate for them are short stories, nursery rhymes, and songs. Average learners, whose age ranges are between 8 and 12 years old, love to use their imagination and creativity. The appropriate methods are puzzle-like activities, drawing things, games, making things, physical movement, and songs. Children on age 13 up are classified into transition age children. They usually need a challenge to learn, they are less motivated and they are very self-conscious. What to do with these kids are involving them to play games, role play, or drama. (p.1)

Recent research on young learners’ course-books and materials used in foreign language classes shows the implementation of a variety of methodologies and teaching

strategies that tend to focus specifically on the acquisition, by learners, of particular grammatical structures and sets of vocabulary items. This may be viewed as a sound practice, one which gradually introduces the children to foreign language sounds, words and sentences through easy communicative songs and games—which also further enhance their motivation and enthusiasm (Cameron, 2003). In addition, teaching English to young learners brings a number of challenges most of which stem from the characteristics of young learners that are different from those of older learners (Cameron, 2003). Hence, taking these characteristics into account and determining the language instruction is of utmost importance. Young learners tend to learn implicitly rather than explicitly (Cameron, 2001; Pinter, 2006; Slatterly and Willis, 2001). They can understand meaningful messages, but cannot analyze the language as a system yet. Thus, it is crucial to present and use the language with young learners within 'meaningful contexts' reflecting the authentic use of language (Cameron, 2001; Halliwell, 1992). As Arikan's (2009) maintains although all grammar teaching is contextual at differing degrees, it is expected that “the teacher can contextualize the lesson through numerous methods including (but not limited to), using audio or visual materials, bringing in realia and props, storytelling, problem solving, giving examples, showing grammar usage, playing games, and teaching explicitly or implicitly” (p. 90).

Children are good observers and they make use of such contextual clues like movements (body language), intonation, mimics and gestures, actions and messages in order to understand and interpret the language itself (Brewster et al., 2002; Cabrera and Martinez, 2001; Slatterly and Willis, 2001). A further characteristic is that young learners enjoy fantasy and imagination (Pinter, 2006). Games and cartoons suit well in fostering young learners' imagination and fantasy. The rationale behind choosing cartoons as teaching materials rather than pictures or stories is that they contain colorful characters and catchy visual presentations accompanied by enjoyable sounds and music (Bishop and Cates, 2001). Teachers are interested in using animations while teaching all kinds of subjects (Kristiansen, 2001).

To sum up, because of the importance of children's language learning, the appropriate materials, techniques, and methods are necessary to be investigated in order to attract and make the children interested in learning English.

1.3. Statement of the problem

Since the English language has become the dominant international language, the importance of learning English has increased and teaching English to young learners has become more important. "Teaching English to young learners (TEYL) is a rapidly growing field around the world, and English education is increasingly found at the primary levels" (shin, 2007, p. 6).

Armissilvia (2010) in his article 'Problems May Occur in Teaching Young Learners' states that:

With the flow of globalization, the need of English teaching is rapidly increasing, including teaching young learners. They are hoped to be the generation who learn English earlier than the previous generation did so that they will be soon ready to overcome the globalization. Thus, the starting age for the young learners becomes earlier. Two decades ago English teaching was started on the 4th grade of Elementary school. Yet, today's young learners English teaching begins even when they are still under 5 years old (pre-school). This also increases the demand for the young learners' teachers. They will be the introducers of English for the early aged learners (p.1).

The way children learn a second or foreign language differs from the adult approach toward learning. As Sensory and Ozad (2009) state "Children gain literacy in the traditional sense and have a shorter concentration span than adults. They are active and consider learning a kind of play. Recognition of these differences led to the proliferation of materials developed for young English learners" (p.1).

So teaching English to young learners has become a challenging activity. "We have all observed children acquiring their first language very easily and well, yet individuals learning a second language, particularly when they enter the educational setting, they meet with great difficulty and sometimes failure" (Brown, 2007, p.54).

Armissilvia (2010) suggests four major problems in teaching young learners: (i) the inappropriateness of the teaching techniques with the children's level of growth (ii) the

low quality of English teachers for young learners (iii) the weak coordination between teacher and parents and (iv) the availability of the resources (p.2).

The first problem mentioned above is the problem of appropriate techniques used by teachers in classes for teaching. Furthermore, "in the past 50 years alone, English language has gone through a whirlwind of transitions in its methodology, from Grammar-translation method to Direct method, to Audiolingualism, to Cognitive code and a host of variations in each" (Pica, 2000, p.2). Other methods have also been introduced like Silent way (Gattego, 1978), Total Physical Response (Asher, 1969), Suggestopedia (Lazanov, 1978), Natural approach (Krashen and Terrell, 1977), etc. So the problem is that which of these methods is appropriate for teaching English to young learners and which one motivates learners more to learning English. According to Celce-Murcia (2001) "children are more likely to play with language than adults are. Children can be more effectively engaged in stories and games. They are less likely to notice errors and correct them" (p.139).

However, in Iran there seems still to be a demand for searching for an appropriate method for teaching English to young learners. Such a need has not so far been into focus despite the increasing request for young learners' English learning. The present study addressed the above gap in research on two methods of teaching English: Audiolingual method and Natural approach to be put into investigation. The reason for choosing these two methods was that a simple survey by the researcher indicated that Audiolingual method is the most frequently used method for teaching English to young learners and Natural approach is the second most frequently used method in most language institutions across Esfahan. Thus the present study considered these two methods and aimed to see the progress of young learners (aged 7 to 9) in learning English after the same period of their exposure to English.

1.4. Significance of the study

The need to study English has increased in recent years. Nowadays, people need to know English to communicate with each other for business, education, and many other purposes. It has actually become a "must" for many to learn English as early as possible. In the fast growing world of technology and communication, people need to study

English from very young ages and this should lead to fluent speakers of English. In this case, we need suitable educational programs, useful materials, and appropriate methods.

In this study, I considered young learners and the study was on two methods, Audio-lingual method and Natural approach, as they were mostly used in Isfahan at present. The aim here was to examine which of the two methods helps young learners to show more improvement, especially in learning English vocabularies and communication skills. The research also intended to see which method motivated the young learners more in learning English.

1.5. The purpose of the Study

The present study aimed to investigate the progress of EFL young learners in learning English while the two methods of Audio lingual and Natural approach were in use. The focus hence was on the acquisition of English vocabulary for both groups of young learners after a certain period of learning, and on the best method for improving communication skills in English for EFL young learners. The study also examines the above two methods in terms of motivating the young learners in learning English. It also sought the ideas of parents, the English teachers of the young learners and the head teachers of each school toward the above teaching methodologies.

1.6. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study aimed to address the following six research questions:

1. Do EFL young learners acquire English vocabulary taught through the Audiolingual method significantly better than Natural approach?
2. Do EFL young learners acquire communicative skills taught through the Audiolingual method significantly better than Natural approach?
3. Do EFL young learners show more motivation in learning when English is taught through Natural approach or Audiolingual method?
4. Which method of teaching do teachers prefer to use when teaching EFL to young learners?

5. How do parents of young learners react towards the teaching methods used by their children's English teachers?
6. How do the head teachers in each school react towards the teaching methods used in their schools?

Based on the aforementioned questions the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. There is no significant difference between the acquisition of English vocabulary by young EFL learners learning through the Audiolingual method and Natural approach.
2. There is no significant difference in acquiring communication skills between those young learners who learn English through the Audiolingual method and those who learn it via Natural approach.
3. There is no difference in the level of motivation between those young learners who learn English through the Audiolingual method as opposed to those who learn it via Natural approach.
4. There is no difference in preferring the Audiolingual method to Natural approach for English teachers who teach English to young learners.
5. There is no difference in preferring the Audiolingual method to Natural approach for EFL young learners' parents.
6. There is no difference in preferring the Audiolingual method to Natural approach for the head teachers in each school.

1.7. Definition of Key Terms

The Audiolingual method: According to Celce-Murcia (2001):

“A reaction to the Reading Approach and its lack of emphasis on oral-aural skills; this approach became dominant in the United States during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s; it draws from the Reform movement and the Direct Approach but adds features from structural linguistics[Bloomfield, 1993] and behavioral psychology [Skinner, 1957]” (p.7).

The Natural Approach: A teaching methodology in which “the emphasis is on exposure, or input, rather than practice; optimizing emotional preparedness for learning; a prolonged period of attention to what the language learners hear before they try to produce language; and a willingness to use written and other materials as a source of comprehensible input” (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p.179).

Young Learners: “Children from the first year of formal schooling (five or six years old) to eleven or twelve years of age” (Phillips, 1993, p.5). Some even believe “Teaching English to young learners mean teaching children between ages 3 and 11” (Piccolo, 2010, p.7).

Vocabulary Learning: Learning vocabulary is an important aspect of language development (Penno, Wilkinson, & Moore, 2002). Moreover, for some scholars vocabulary knowledge is seen as the most important factor in academic achievement for second or foreign language learners (Saville-Troike, 1984).

Communicative Competence: Dell Hymes (1971) defined communicative competence as a term in linguistics which refers to a language user's grammatical knowledge of syntax, morphology, phonology and the like, as well as social knowledge about how and when to use utterances appropriately. Within this process, communicative competence is a way of describing what a language speaker knows which enables him or her to interact effectively with others.

1.8. The Structure of the Thesis

The present study is organized in five chapters:

Chapter one: Introduction. This discussed the problem under study, the significance of the study and the research questions and hypotheses.

Chapter two: Literature review. This discussed the recent and reliable books, papers, articles, and similar research studies, which bear some relevance and significance to the study, along with their strong and weak points.

Chapter three: Method of the study, in which some information about the questions, variables, hypotheses, participants, and materials will be presented. The scoring as well as the procedures of data collection, data analysis and their details will be provided.

Chapter four: Results, in which the findings of the investigation will be fully presented in appropriate tables.

Chapter five: Summary, discussion and conclusion will be presented; some implications and possible applications and further ideas for future research will be presented as well.

The next chapter presents the literature review for the present study.