

“Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them.”

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900 – 1944)
“The Little Prince”, 1943

Young and Older Learners

It has not been confirmed by research, that children transplanted to a foreign environment learn the language easier. On the contrary, the older the child the more effectively he or she learns (Snow and Hoefnagel-Hoehle 1978). Teenagers are probably the best learners, but young children are better in learning pronunciation.

If we consider the foreign environment, the amount of time the child is exposed to the language is bigger here. Also the number of various “teachers” in the foreign surroundings is bigger. The so called “survival” motive works very well, too, bringing the feeling of the dependence of people around who are able to supply the child’s needs.

In a formal classroom only one teacher to a number of children talks in front of the board. Time offered to speak is very limited and the “survival” motive doesn’t work.

If you have a limited number of hours to give to foreign language learning at school, it will probably be more effective to invest these in the older classes. **The optimum age** for starting a foreign language in school seems to be 12 years of age (Snow) or 10 years of age (Urr). Puberty is a critical period in language learning. Language acquisition begins at about the same time as lateralization of our brain starts (when the child is about two years old). It is merely finished at some time between the age of five and the beginning of puberty. After this age language will not be acquired at all or at least not with full mastery of its resources (Lyons). Vocal cords cannot offer the same plasticity as before puberty as well.

Other researchers believe that there may not be any critical period or several (Singleton, 1989). It is because human life is so colourful and there might be really many things affecting language acquisition. An early start to language learning is likely to lead to better long-term results (if reinforced later), but on the other hand after puberty people might be well motivated, calmer and well concentrated.

Children have not developed their abstract thinking well yet. Also their logical thinking is on a lower level if compared with adults. Therefore adults’ capacity for understanding and logical thought is greater. Adults have developed a number of **learning skills** and their individual strategies which children do not have yet. Adults cope with temporary frustrations in the hope of long-term rewards. Children need to see the results immediately. Adults are more patient and disciplined; they tend to be more cooperative thanks to their life experience and cognitive skills they have developed. Adults often have a clear purpose. They know why they should study. Studies might enable them travelling abroad, better social contacts, promotion at work.

Adults are said to have a longer **concentration** span. But even a child may spend hours absorbed in an activity that is really interesting. With an attractive toy a child seems not to get bored for days. From this point of view it looks very easy to motivate children. But you can lose **motivation** more easily with young learners. New and new interesting and attractive motives have to be brought. Monotonous, pointless activities are of no use. Older learners are more self-reliant. Motivation of adults tends to be more stable. They usually learn voluntarily with a clear aim. They are more tolerant, too, which makes the teacher’s role easier in a way.

Maybe they know what B.F. Skinner (1904-1990) has expressed so appropriately: "Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten."

Have you met a pupil in your class who is not very good at English but who is excellent at drawing or creating practical things? Have you met anybody for whom languages were a nightmare but who was an excellent manager? These people are not of lower intelligence. IQ tests may discover frustrating conclusions but that is because most of the tests are math- or language-oriented. In fact these people are sometimes gifted. Just they need different approach to learning. Scientists have identified at least 7 basic intelligence types. Later the eighth - the naturalist intelligence has been added. Following is the multiple intelligences list:

1. Linguistic intelligence
2. Logical-mathematical intelligence
3. Spatial intelligence
4. Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence
5. Musical intelligence
6. Interpersonal intelligence
7. Intrapersonal intelligence
8. Naturalist intelligence

If we have not recognized the fact that children of different intelligences need different methods in our English lessons so far, now we might have discovered some of the reasons why our teaching effort was not always successful. The authors of English textbooks usually ignore the differences among pupils pretending pupils in the group are all of the same kind.

Linguistic intelligence

is in the centre of our attention. We would like to fill in the classroom with the pupils of this intelligence. They can remember the new words easily. They like reading and telling stories. They are successful in word games. They love tongue-twisters.

Most of the textbooks are prepared for these pupils. They will successfully go through the exercises which want them to transfer the sentence from one tense to the other, to write comparatives, to fill in the gap, to complete the word or the sentence.

Logical-mathematical intelligence

needs a varied care. These pupils often do calculations in their heads. They like to put things into categories. They like to work with the computers. They love number games and they often ask about the reasons, about how things work.

For these pupils filling in various charts, crosswords can be pleasure. CALL (computer-assisted language learning) seems to be invented for them.

Spatial intelligence

Pupils with this type of intelligence are not happy just with words in one line. Two or better three dimensions are more enjoyable. These pupils love pictures. They can draw well. They enjoy art activities. Their world is full of shapes and colours. These pupils will enjoy putting puzzles together, drawing while learning English. They will love posters, maps and objects used in the lesson.

Bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence

does not like calm and quiet surroundings. It is difficult for these pupils to sit quietly for a long time. They are good at sports and they like working with their hands. For these pupils

different activities should be prepared: dancing, moving around, imitating, drama and role-playing, creating material things, building and constructing.

Musical intelligence

Pupils of this type appreciate the sounds of language, intonation and rhythm. These pupils often tap rhythmically on the desk. They often hum the melody of a song.

Songs and rhymes in English will be ideal materials for these pupils. Activities with clapping hands or rhythmical gesturing will make them happy.

Interpersonal intelligence

These people love socializing. They naturally organize parties, become leaders of groups. They are talkative and helpful. They are far from being introverts. These pupils are good at role-playing, dramatizations. They are good at various projects where group-work is required. They even do not refuse longer monologues when asked to talk.

Intrapersonal intelligence

These pupils are not unhappy when they have to be alone or they have to work on their own. Their inner world is usually very rich and colourful. They like silent reading, listening to their favourite music. They are mostly introverts. At school they prefer individual activities. Team-work is not their favourite. Self-correction should be used rather than peer-correction. They are usually focused on what they are doing and having accepted their mistakes they do their best to avoid them next time.

Naturalist intelligence

These pupils would like to live close to the nature. Sitting at school does not bring them much pleasure. It is difficult to make them concentrated on learning verb tenses when they would like to listen to the sounds of nature. Just talking about animals will change them into enthusiasts. Topics concerning nature will open a small door to English for them. But you will never persuade them that English is necessary for their communication with birds or beetles.

What has been mentioned above doesn't mean that a pupil with logical-mathematical intelligence will not be successful at songs and rhymes. There are more intelligences hidden in our personalities. Just one or two of them are dominant. The teacher's task is to find suitable activities to cover all types of intelligences.