Children all over the world are a joy but also a challenge to teach. Language teaching in particular brings many challenges. Effective teachers find it very useful to consider some of the current issues in English language teaching. Today, researchers and practitioners are providing important insights into the following areas.

- **Social constructivist focus**
  Cognitive psychology, humanism, and social interactionism have had a strong impact on language teaching philosophy and methodology. Today, language learning is seen as a dynamic process in which learners construct their own personal understanding or meaning from their experiences in the social world around them.

  - The learner is seen as an active meaning-maker.
  - It is important to develop conceptual understanding and cognitive skills.
  - This focus uses the discovery approach to learning and spiral curriculum.
  - Each person’s “personal construct” is dependent upon previous experiences, which influence how they think and feel about future events.
Learning is not an accumulation of memorized facts but rather a process of making sense and mapping new knowledge onto the old.

Learning takes place only when the learner perceives personal relevance.

Learning requires active participation in meaningful experiences.

A sense of personal identity, independence, creativity, and self-reliance all grow in an atmosphere of trust and "unconditional positive regard."

Learning is social, and it is through language that culture is transmitted, thinking is developed, and learning takes place.

Working with a competent adult or peer at a level that is just above a learner's present capabilities allows a learner to move into the next stage of knowledge or skill.

Key elements of learner, teacher, task, and context interact with and affect each other in the process of learning.

**Values education**

The moral dimension of education includes addressing the whole child. To build self-esteem, to encourage awareness of choices and their implications and consequences, to lead learners to self-knowledge and eventual autonomy, we must address our beliefs about the kind of society we are trying to build and the character of the people in it.

Universal values typically taught include: appreciation of diversity, obedience, compassion, respect for others, duty, respect for the Earth, empathy, responsibility, honesty, self-esteem, kindness, sense of fairness, and justice.

Focuses on the values, implicit and explicit, in stories, poems, dialogues, role plays, art, cartoons, movies, videos, and books.

Focuses on identification and understanding of cause and effect relationships, and the decision-making process.

Encourages appreciation of the differences that make people, customs, and cultures unique as well as the similarities that make them all part of the same human family.

**Metacognitive, cognitive, and social processes**

From the social constructivist perspective, the mental and social processes learners go through and the skills and strategies they use in order to learn successfully are of key importance. Learners can, in fact, learn to be more effective learners, and teachers can help them become better learners through explicit strategy instruction.

**Metacognitive processes:** learners “thinking about their own thinking.” Examples include setting goals, planning, setting priorities, self-management, and self-evaluation.

**Cognitive processes:** learners processing information (obtaining, storing, retrieving, using) in order to learn. Examples include classifying, note-taking, summarizing, using a graphic organizer, and predicting.

**Social/affective processes:** learners consulting with peers to clarify or check understanding, working in cooperative groups, asking the teacher for help, and using mental “self-talk” to maintain motivation and build competence.

It is important to begin by dealing with strategies children already know and use in their lives, and to follow an effective sequence of instruction (such as Chamot and O’Malley’s five-step framework of preparation, presentation, practice, evaluation, and expansion). Frequent modeling and recycling is key.
Listening, speaking, reading, writing

Children benefit from theme-based teaching derived from topics that relate to their lives. In teaching the receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing), meaning and relevance are key.

Support meaning through visual cues, such as illustrations, photos, student drawings, posters, puppets, realia, and mime. Include auditory cues, such as songs, chants, sound effects, and dialogues; as well as tactile/kinesthetic cues, such as coloring, arranging, sticking, performing actions to stories/songs/chants, mime, and activities requiring physical movement, such as TPR (Total Physical Response, as developed by Asher), board games, and physical games (for example, musical chairs, board races, and floor games).

Focuses on concept checking: after any activity with children, it is important to check for comprehension. Simply asking learners if they have understood is not an accurate way of checking understanding, as children are usually eager to please their teachers and will say they understand even when they don't.

A variety of activities is very important, and activities should change with frequency, before learners get tired of what they're doing.

It is a good idea to mix active and sedentary activities, as well as mix activity groupings (individual, pairs, small groups, whole class).

For younger children, the focus is on listening and speaking activities. They should be achievable but reasonably challenging. Written activities should be used gradually and sparingly until there is adequate motor skills development (7-8 years old).

For older children, the focus is on all the skills, with gradual and increasing emphasis on reading and writing. Though older learners have longer attention spans, it is still important to have a variety of task types and groupings. Older children, as their cognitive development matures, can move from concrete to more abstract concepts.

Grammar and vocabulary

Words carry much important grammatical information, and vocabulary learning, especially with children, should serve as a stepping stone to learning and using grammar. Both grammar and vocabulary need to be taught in meaningful contexts, and children need to be given many opportunities over time to use the language they have learned.

It is important for children to see both words and structures recycled over and over in different meaningful contexts, each time extending their knowledge of form, meaning, and use. Over time, as children encounter familiar words and structures again, they will further complete their partial understanding as they see items in new contexts.

For younger children, there is more of a focus on words and less focus on structures. Children learn phrases holistically, in “chunks” that they use as a single item, rather than analyze structures in terms of separate parts.

For older children, the focus is on a gradual and increasing amount of “noticing” structures; they are more able to notice features, categorize, and analyze language, separating it into its component parts. Grammar analysis in terms of rules should wait until the teenage years, when analytical abilities and orientation to detail develop more fully.

Feedback and motivation

Motivation is a state of activation which leads to action to reach a goal. Individuals are motivated differently and make their own sense of the external influences surrounding them in ways that are personal to them. Many factors affect motivation, one of which is feedback.

Learners are motivated intrinsically (the activity is enjoyable in itself, has value for the person, and satisfies curiosity or desire) or extrinsically (the activity leads to obtaining something else, such as passing an exam, a promotion, or financial reward).
An important factor in activating motivation is curiosity. It can be provoked by making tasks surprising, incongruous, or different from existing ideas.

Feedback can refer to the teacher’s comments and behaviors relating to student performance (praise, criticism, grading, rewards, punishment). It can also refer to information teachers receive from their students’ opinions of how the class is going and how they are performing. In addition to the content of feedback, the intention of the person providing the feedback, the way in which it is given, and the way in which it is interpreted by the person receiving it all affect motivation.

Feedback in the form of praise, stars, class points, merit marks, certificates, stickers, and sweets is more effective than punishment as a motivating force for good behavior, but most motivating is private praise and genuine teacher interest.

Studies with children: if children were offered prizes for drawing activities they had chosen of their own free will, they were much less likely to choose the same activities again than children who did not receive prizes.

Informational focus: when learners interpret feedback as informational rather than controlling, motivation is maintained or increased, since information provides them with clues to help them perform better. An information-free “Good job!” makes learners feel good very briefly, but means little in terms of ways to improve. Indiscriminate praise, or praise which is given only to those who meet some general norm, often lower the feelings of self-competence and self-efficacy of other learners.

Types of feedback/assessment

Both of the two major trends in primary assessment focus on evaluating young learners’ knowledge of English, but the approaches are very different.

External formal assessment

- Focuses on “standardized tests”: many schools administer their own institutional standardized exams, and many others are required to administer national standardized tests at certain intervals during the primary school period. This kind of test is rapidly growing in popularity around the world.
- National, state, or institution-mandated standardized tests are timed, and typically have multiple-choice formats, fill-in-the-blank formats, etc. Test items are decontextualized and noninteractive.
- Focuses on the “right” answer: test scores are seen as sufficient feedback for student evaluation.
- Fosters extrinsic motivation.

Performance assessment

- Focuses on individualized assessment, in which care is taken to address not only what the learner was actually taught, but also the formats and activities through which the learner was taught, such as songs, TPR, pictures, role plays, stories, pair work, and so on. The learner is assessed using the same kinds of materials he/she was exposed to in class, including short reports, projects, dialogues, and portfolios.
- Untimed, free-response formats allow for open-ended, creative answers
- Interactive, communicative tasks in context
- Individualized feedback
- Fosters intrinsic motivation
Home/school connection

A strong home/school connection brings together the child’s two worlds of home and school. It helps each individual child learn and grow cognitively, socially, and emotionally with the full support of significant others; and helps parents better understand the teacher’s methods in the classroom.

- If culturally appropriate, make home visits.
- Send letters describing the child’s progress to the parents, with equal time given to what the child does well and any learning challenges the child is facing.
- Learn about the traditions, values, and beliefs of the parents.
- Trust parents to help at home; the development of ideas, concepts, and processes can be done in any language.
- Have regular school conferences with the parents to share information and examples of the student’s work.
- Encourage the parents to monitor (without specifically providing answers) the child’s homework, providing reinforcement not for “right” or “wrong” answers but for the child’s taking the responsibility to do the work.
- If culturally appropriate, send home language activities that parents can do with their child, in English if possible, but if not, in the native language.

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