

Child-friendly Grammar

What is child-friendly and what is grammar?

An approach to teaching can be described as child-friendly if it is appropriate for the ways in which children learn. Although children are often very flexible, they cannot always learn in the way that we might wish to teach. If we want our teaching to be effective we must use a child-friendly approach.

In this context we are not interested in a definition of grammar. We are concerned with linguistic performance rather than linguistic knowledge. We want the children to be able to speak and write English with a reasonable degree of accuracy and fluency. We are not training them to write grammar books or give grammar lessons.

Understanding the mind of the child

The first thing we must say is that children are different from adults. Their brains have different capabilities. They think in different ways.

We know that if $A = B$ and $B = C$, then $A = C$. But this type of logical thinking is beyond a 7-11 year-old child's capability. You can try to teach this, but you will always fail because the child does not have the mental resources to understand it. Logical thought of this type can only apply to real and concrete objects in the real world. So the child can understand that if stick A is longer than stick B, and stick B is longer than stick C, then stick A is longer than stick C. Grammatical knowledge is based on abstract concepts which the child cannot understand.

Even at the age of 3 or 4, a child can understand that if Mummy is putting on her overcoat, she is going to go out. The child does not understand this logically. It is just that the child has seen this pattern of behaviour repeatedly and can remember the next item in the sequence.

This is thought to be the way in which the child develops an **operational** ability in the grammar of the mother tongue before school age.

In 'Introducing Language and Mind' by Jean Aitchison [Penguin Books, 1992], the author presents a timetable for the language development of a typical English speaking child.

6 weeks	cooing
6 months	babbling
8 months	intonation patterns
12-15 months	single words
18 months	two-word utterances, simple negatives, simple questions
21 months	three-word utterances
2 years	inflections (word endings)
3 years	adult-type negatives adult-type questions
3.5 years	adult-type inflections
10 years	adult type grammar

In the same book, Jean Aitchison points out that children do not simply imitate adults. Utterances such as 'Me dranked tea', 'No Teddy go', which have not been copied from adults, demonstrate that the child is operating their own system of linguistic 'rules' which they devise and modify as they get older. The development of these rules is an unconscious process.

How should this influence foreign language teaching?

The evidence above refers to the acquisition of the mother tongue. As we can see the child does not begin to **understand** the grammar of the mother tongue until at least the age of ten or eleven. Younger children can **operate** the grammatical system of the mother tongue, but the child is simply copying patterns.

But an eight-year-old child has already had more than thirty-thousand hours of exposure and use of the mother tongue. A child learning a foreign language has less than 100 hours of exposure and use in any year.

So therefore we cannot expect to see our foreign language learners developing an operational ability to the level of their mother tongue.

The Role of Grammar in EFL

The textbook writer requires a very good understanding of the grammar of the language in order to devise the content and sequence of lessons in the syllabus. Grammar is fundamental to the development of English language programmes.

Using the materials

It is clearly pointless for the teacher to attempt to teach children **about** grammar. Children do not have the mental capacity to understand these abstract ideas.

However, language patterns are very important for children. Their operational ability in the language is fundamentally based on learning these patterns.

Courses such as 'Blue Skies' 'High Five' are based on the principle of 'building blocks' – building from a simple pattern to a more complex pattern.

The poem on page 17 of Unit 4 in Book 4 of 'Blue Skies' is precisely that type of repeated pattern practice which children need. We can see the repeated pattern of:

I was painting the fence when Peter came by.
I was cutting the grass when Katy came by.
I was sweeping the yard when Susan came by.
I was watching TV when my mum came home.

The children are learning a pattern which combines the Past Continuous (Progressive) form with the Past Simple. Of course, we don't tell them this. It is enough that they learn the repeated pattern.

Pattern Practice in context

Pattern practice alone is not enough. It should exist within a comprehensible context. If we look at all of Unit 4 ('Blue Skies Book 4'), we see that it begins with a review of the Present Continuous (Progressive) 'I'm drawing' pattern. This is not new. The children have been using this pattern for two or three years.

It is practised with the teacher, Miss Grady, coming into the classroom and asking the children 'What are you doing?' The children respond 'I'm reading', 'I'm writing', 'I'm drawing', 'I'm painting', 'We're talking'. (Notice the repeated pattern.)

On the following page, the children are now out in the playground. One of the children says 'When Miss Grady came in, I was reading. What were you doing?' The other children respond 'I was painting', 'I was writing', 'I was drawing', 'We were talking'. (Again notice the repeated pattern.)

The following page contains oral and written practice. Under the question 'What are they doing?' we see four pictures captioned

'I _____ reading'
'She _____ drawing'
'They _____ writing'
'He _____ painting'

Children must add: am, is, are.

This is followed by pictures showing the children having completed their activities. Under the question 'What were they doing?' the pictures are captioned

'I _____ reading'
'She _____ drawing'
'They _____ writing'
'He _____ painting'.

Children must add: was, were.

The poem 'I was painting the fence when ...' is the final page of the unit, providing memorable practice in the new grammatical pattern.

Notice that the words PAST, PROGRESSIVE, CONTINUOUS have not been mentioned. We have taught language (in the form of language patterns), we have not taught grammar.

Conclusions

I began by saying that a child-friendly teaching approach is appropriate to the way in which children learn. **Children learn by using patterns rather than logic.** In teaching the grammatical systems of English we should teach patterns, rather than giving 'logical' explanations. 'Blue Skies' is a very good example of this type of pattern based learning.