

# Opportunities for language learning through interaction in the primary English classroom

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Ein Faktor, der generell als wichtig erachtet wird, wenn es um erfolgreiches Fremdsprachenlernen geht, ist ein möglichst früher Beginn. Ein früher Beginn ist jedoch keine hinreichende Bedingung für Erfolg. Vielmehr hängt dieser vom Zusammenwirken mehrerer Faktoren ab, wie z.B. der Verfügbarkeit von qualitativ hochwertigem Input oder Gelegenheiten zur kommunikativen Interaktion in bedeutungsvollen Situationen. In diesem Beitrag geht es um die Rolle von Interaktion im Englischunterricht der Grundschule und die Bedeutung von Aktivitäten, die den Kindern das Verstehen und den aktiven Gebrauch der Zielsprache ermöglichen. Es werden Beispiele für die Lerner-Lerner-Interaktion vorgestellt, die deutlich machen, wie durch die Kommunikation der Kinder untereinander vielfältige Lerngelegenheiten entstehen können. Diese ermöglichen es ihnen, die neue Sprache zu entdecken und ihre kommunikative Kompetenz zu entwickeln.



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## 1. Introduction

The idea that an early start to second language learning leads to better ultimate attainment has strongly influenced the discussion of when it would be most appropriate to begin school instruction in a foreign language. This discussion has taken place predominantly against the background of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) and its underlying assumption that foreign language learning is maturationally constrained (see Lambellet, this volume, for discussion). Even though its theoretical basis has been subject to criticism, the main conclusion from research within the framework of the CPH can be considered to be widely accepted in second language research:

“*Pass-for-native* ability is most likely to be reached by those who start (...) when they are young and who continue to use the language over many years” (Lightbown, 2008: 10).

However, as Lightbown (2008: 10) points out, “CPH research (...) does not address the question of how easy it is for young learners to acquire languages or how quickly they do so.”

Even if this claim does not deny the advantages of an early start, it can be understood as a warning against unrealistic expectations of a rapid success in early foreign language learning.

An early start also plays a crucial role in one of the most successful programs of additional language learning, namely the Canadian immersion program. As part of the overall concept, foreign language teaching starts in primary school or even kindergarten and content subjects are taught in the target language in order to maximise exposure to the target language from the earliest possible starting point. Consequently, Wesche (2002) and Kersten et al. (2010) see an early start as one of several critical conditions for the success of immersion programs. These conditions can be summarised as follows:

- language contact starts as early as possible
- intensive L2 exposure occurs over an extended period
- input is high-quality as it is age-appropriate as well as lexically and structurally rich
- activities engage learners in understanding and using the language.

(Wesche, 2002: 358; Kersten *et al.*, 2010: 4)

This list shows that successful language learning depends on the interplay of different factors and that simply starting early is not sufficient. Naturally, the circumstances of early foreign language learning in less intensive, mainstream classrooms differ in many ways from those in the Canadian context. This applies in particular to the intensity of exposure and the time available for learning. Nevertheless, this does not make these critical conditions less relevant for foreign language learning in the classroom.

In the following, some implications of the above critical conditions for foreign language learning in the primary school context will be discussed. In doing so, the focus will be on the fourth

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condition, namely the importance of integrating activities that engage learners in understanding and using the language. In contrast to the other more general requirements, it directly refers to pedagogical implications for the young learners' classroom. Examples of peer-peer interaction will be presented in order to illustrate the learning potential that is inherent in this form of communication.

### 2. Implications for early foreign language learning

The assumption that there are advantages to an 'early start' has already had a major influence on the introduction of foreign language instruction in primary schools in Europe. The reasoning behind this is that it gives children more time for learning and as a result more exposure to the foreign language. As Kersten et al. (2010) indicate, the importance of high quality input for successful language learning points to the essential role of professional teacher education and the use of the target language in the classroom. In order to support the active role of the learner, the provision of input needs to be constructed in ways that it provides genuine opportunities to engage in meaningful language use in communicative interaction, which is the fourth of the critical conditions listed above. As Tarone (1998: 432) states:

"Input is provided in the course of meaningful interactions in which the learner is both producing interlanguage and receiving target language (TL) input in a kind of dance of meaning-making"

The aim should therefore be to organise the use of the target language in ways that allow children to understand and express meaningful language.

Older learners have a greater capacity to learn explicitly and draw on a greater overall learning experience than children when learning a foreign language. Thus, they generally proceed faster through the early stages of second language acquisition than children, who learn mainly implicitly (DeKeyser, 2007: 227) and still have to develop the full range of their analytical language abilities. Muñoz (2007: 245) therefore suggests that adequate activities for young children should "provide massive amounts of L2 exposure for young learners to capitalize on their implicit learning mechanisms." For speaking activities, she recommends communicative activities that involve repetition and chunks (Muñoz, 2007: 243ff.). Such activities play an important role in the early stages of the acquisition process and help build the foundation for future learning. However, as with time, this foundation is necessary, but not sufficient. Young learners need opportunities to actively produce and receive, understand and use the language in ways that transcend formulae and reproduction. Hence, there should also

be a place for activities that permit them to perceive and creatively apply patterned feature sets and to go beyond what is made available in the input.

### 3. Engaging young learners in understanding and using language

In the following section, examples of peer-peer interactions produced by 7 to 10 year old German learners of English will be presented. These interactions demonstrate the various learning opportunities provided by communicative tasks that are suitable for learners at primary school level. In the examples given, the interaction is based on information-gap tasks. They require learners to use the target language spontaneously to describe pictures to a partner. The participation in such tasks achieves two purposes. First, it gives the children the opportunity to find their own means and strategies to express meaning. Second, the errors they make in this process can lead to corrective feedback, on the lexical as well as on the grammatical level, in ways that have been shown to drive second language acquisition forward (cf. Mackey *et al.*, 2007).

In example (1), two learners describe their pictures to each other in order to determine the differences between the pictures.

#### Example 1 Learners (L) in grade 3 (aged 8-9 years), 1.5 years of instruction; R = researcher (cf. Roos, 2012)

L3: I have in the garden a one cat.

L4: I have in the garden two cats.

L3: In the garden (/) (whispers) {\*Ich weiß nicht mehr, wie Baum heißt?}

R: A tree.

L3: In the garden the tree and (/) in the garden a two trees and on the trees {\*sind} apples.

L4: I have on the trees not apples.

(/) = interruption; {\*} = German words/phrases; \*I cannot remember the word for 'tree'; sind = are

## Children also use the language available to them creatively and strategically in order to compensate for their incomplete knowledge of the target language.

Learner 3 does not know the English word for 'tree'. He signals this explicitly and integrates the translation that is provided by the researcher into his utterance. The fact that he immediately uses the new word, both in its singular and in its plural form, also indicates that he is self-correcting, and that he is already able to produce regular plural forms.

Both example (1) above and example (2) below are based on tasks with a focus on form (cf. Long, 2000; Doughty & Williams, 1998). This means that the tasks were designed to provide natural contexts for the use of a particular language form, namely plural -s. This explains why the pictures given to the learners contain elements in different quantities that need to be compared in order to solve the respective tasks. The children were not made aware of this and were focusing on meaning, but the meanings that they were required to make also required them to use singular and plural forms in different contexts. This makes it possible to take advantage of learning opportunities to bring grammar to the attention of children in non-formal ways (Cameron, 2001: 110).

In example 2, two children in grade 2 work with a task:

### Example 2

#### Learners in grade 2 (aged 7-8 years), 1.5 years of instruction (unpublished data collected by Roos)

L24: I can see ... (/) I can see ...

R: \*Weißt du noch, was Buch auf Englisch ist?

L24: Book.

L23: Book.

L24: Sss! Books!

L23: Books.

*\*Do you remember the English word for book?*

In this case, Learner 24 describes one of several pictures that Learner 23 needs to identify. He begins a sentence by saying 'I can see ...', expecting Learner 23 to complete the sentence with the word 'books'. When Learner 23 does not answer, the researcher asks him whether he remembers the English word 'book'. Learner 24 answers by saying the English word, which is then repeated by Learner 23. However, Learner 24 is not satisfied with his partner's answer, because several

books are depicted on the picture. He makes a hissing sound – presumably a marked form of the plural marker '-s' – and explicitly corrects Learner 23, which leads the latter to repeat the plural form. This shows that even children at a very basic level of proficiency can distinguish between singular and plural forms and give each other corrective feedback, thus focusing on meaning and form at the same time.

In the examples above, the children switch to German or ask for help if they do not know or remember an English word. But they also use the language available to them creatively and strategically in order to compensate for their incomplete knowledge of the target language. This becomes obvious in example 3:

### Example 3

#### Learners in grade 4 (aged 9-10 years), 3.5 years of instruction (cf. Lenzing 2013)

L5: Is on your picture (ehm) white of sky (/) fly in the sky (/) {\*also was heißt Wolke?}

R: A cloud.

L5: A cloud.

L6: Yes.

*\*What is the (English) word for 'cloud'?*

In this example, Learner 5 tries to find out about the elements that are depicted on his partner's picture. He does not know the word 'cloud' and tries to describe its meaning by referring to both the colour of clouds and to their actions in the sky. Only when this proves unsuccessful does he ask for the English word in order to be able to complete the question.

All in all, the examples provided here show how participation in communicative interaction with peers may provide young children with learning opportunities to develop their spoken competence. The examples also remind us that taking risks in order to communicate successfully inevitably leads to errors. These errors can serve as points of reference for the teacher as they provide insights into the learners' developing interlanguage and make it possible to adapt corrective feedback to the individual learners' needs.

### Conclusion

As children share meanings through the use of the foreign language, they may sometimes work at the limit of their oral skills. Still, when being engaged in motivating tasks, they are keen to solve them and to say what they want to say in English. This contributes to their

curiosity and to their creativity to find new ways of expressing meaning or of coining words (cf. Pinter, 2007). By making the most of the language that is available to them, they can thus explore the new language and expand their communicative competence.

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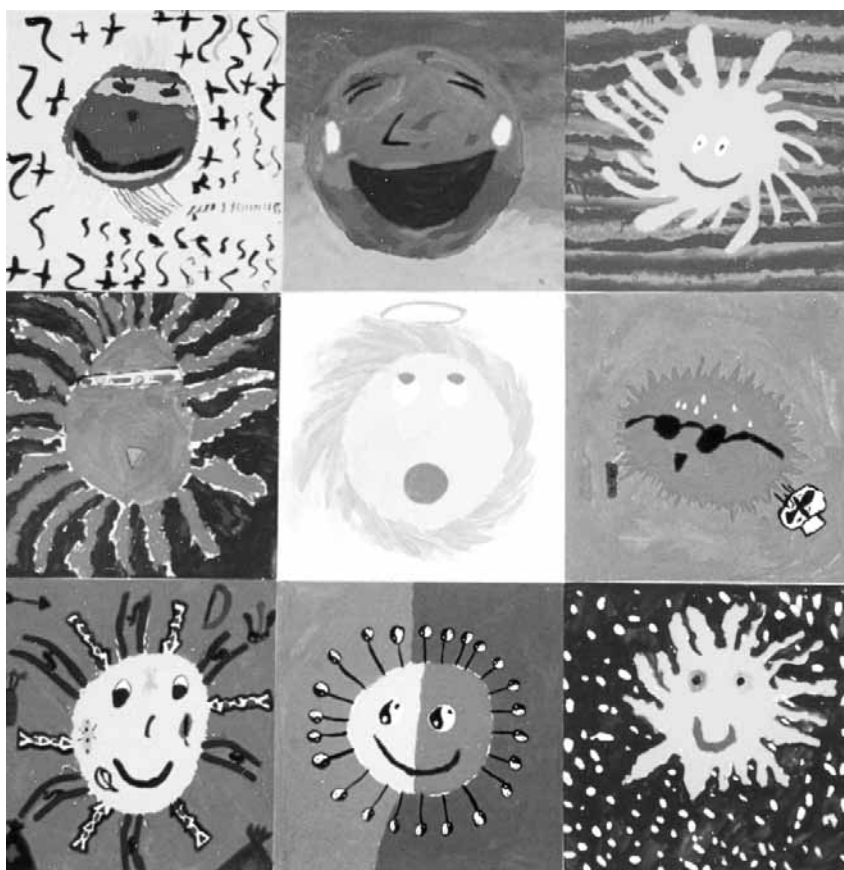
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