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The Impact of Teacher Cognition in Very Young Learner Pedagogy

by Shay Coyne (IH, Sabadel)

With the advent of globalisation, many countries have begun teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to children at increasingly younger ages. In some situations, teaching EFL to Very Young Learners (VYLs) is mandatory. Furthermore, more and more parents are showing an interest in EFL: to provide their children with the tools they will need (in this case English as the lingua franca) to be competitive and successful in a more globalised world.

The term VYL defines children of pre-primary ages, usually between the ages of 3 to 5 years. However, teacher training programs such as the Trinity CertTESOL and the Cambridge CELTA do not provide training for the specific context of teaching VYLs. Thus, many newly-qualified EFL teachers find themselves teaching VYL classes which they have not been prepared for. Without this specialised training, many teachers are left to plan lessons based on their own experiences and personal beliefs. Through the theorisation of VYL pedagogy, the misunderstandings, in terms of complexity and the resulting devaluation of teaching in this highly unique and demanding context, can be addressed and rectified (Cameron, 2005). This article aims to provide insight in this area for teacher trainers and policy makers, by opening discussion and debate on the VYL context, given that these trainers and policy makers have the responsibility to ensure that the teachers subsequently hired to teach VYLs are equipped with both the training and skills to do so effectively.

What Is Teacher Cognition?

A simple definition of teacher cognition is the beliefs and thoughts teachers have about teaching, learners and praxis. It develops through three stages: firstly, in school when the teacher is a student themselves, then during teacher training as a trainee teacher, before finally being influenced by early teaching experiences. It is accepted that teacher cognition influences all aspects of the teaching cycle, and as such, the success of any program is partly determined by the beliefs of the teachers who are expected to implement it, as they serve as a filter which determines the learning experiences teachers will provide (Lim, 2010).

“teachers use personal judgements to decide the overall appropriacy... determining what students will learn and how.”



A young learner working it out

Pic by author

How Does Teacher Cognition Impact the VYL Classroom?

Common consensus in VYL pedagogy is that students need practical experience, which oftentimes directly opposes the formal, prescriptive nature of government policy (Moriarty, Edmonds, Blatchford & Martin, 2001). The result is that these teachers are adapting these formal policies to activities they believe are more appropriate and child-friendly. Therefore, teachers use personal judgements to decide the overall appropriacy of said policy, that is that their teacher cognition is determining what students will learn and how. However, not all beliefs are validated by research and theory. Peacock best summarises the importance of this by stating that “erroneous beliefs have the potential to impact teaching and student learning for decades” (2001, p.177). An example of this impact in VYL pedagogy is the purposeful exclusion of certain activities such as colouring with crayons and planning for arts and crafts, which require fine motor skills such as cutting etc., because the EFL teacher often believes that such activities have no linguistic value, when in fact, research presents a strong case that these are essential precursory skills which form the foundation for successful literacy development (Callcott, Hammond & Hill, 2015).

How Does Teacher Cognition Impact Lesson Planning for VYLs?

Yoo (2005) highlights the effect teacher cognition has during lesson planning for VYLs: teachers who believe literacy to be communicative, plan storytelling and shared discussion activities such as exploring emotions and assigning value and meaning (addressing cognitive and emotional development), whereas teachers who believe literacy is rote memorisation plan reading fluency and isolated phonetic activities.

VYLs also learn through purposeful fun: the challenge here for the VYL teacher is to incorporate linguistic purposes into activities this group of students naturally enjoy. However, this linguistic tweaking of games and other activities will only be addressed if the teacher believes it to be important and consciously plans to include this in the class. All things equal, these

“VYL teachers are providing very different classroom experiences for their learners.”

VYL teachers are providing very different classroom experiences for their learners. Consequently, research into teacher cognition is vital: the process for change and re-education begins with analysing the origins of teachers' beliefs and comparing them to VYL pedagogy (Lim, 2010).

A Final Recommendation for VYL Pedagogy

While each child is unique, VYLs as a group share similar characteristics. Therefore, the first step in bridging the gap between VYL teacher cognition and VYL pedagogy is to provide teachers with formal pre-service training in the VYL context. This will allow teachers to receive a theoretical background and support for the learning experiences they provide for their students. The EFL industry recognises that adults and children learn differently and have included updated modules on teaching children EFL in teacher training programs such as the Trinity CertTESOL and the Cambridge CELTA. However, with the incredibly fast rate that the VYL market is growing due to government initiatives and policies, these preparatory courses need to reflect the current EFL context. Just as activities and methods designed for adult learners are unsuccessful when used with children, so too are activities that are designed for older

learners: these materials and activities are inappropriate in the VYL context. An example of this is the inclusion of competitive elements: while competitions motivate and engage students aged 7 and over, these same competitive activities in the VYL classroom may result in problems with classroom management and frustration, not because they are inherently bad, but because they fail to address Piaget's pre-operational concept of egocentrism: VYLs are unable to see the world from another point of view and as such have problems with concepts such as winning/ losing, turn-taking, sharing and so forth. VYL pedagogy requires an understanding of these students' current developmental stages and the limitations these stages pose for both the students and the teacher- effective planning and teaching stems from this knowledge. Without this specialised training, I believe the language programs and their teachers are done a great disservice. No one would argue that a doctor trained in general practice is fit to perform complex neurosurgery, why does the EFL industry promote the idea that a general teacher training course is enough to teach VYLs?

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