

Characteristics of a Young Learner

Let's begin this second module with a look at who our young learners actually are. We'll start with a question:

In terms of learning capabilities, exactly how is a three year old different from a child aged ten?

We need to recognise that there are significant differences between these learners because they are at different stages of their development. If we can begin to understand some of these differences, then we can start to understand something of the characteristics that our learners will exhibit at different ages. This will help us to understand how activities in the classroom can better address learner's cognitive, language and social development. So in this section we will analyse some of the differences between typical younger learners at different ages.

As with adult learners, children don't fit neatly into boxes. We can't say that by age X they will be able to achieve Y. It will depend on the culture, nationality and background of each individual, also on personality, maturity and exposure to English. After all, we don't all learn at the same pace. So let's look at our learners stage by stage, and try to identify the different characteristics they are likely to possess.

Pre-school or Early School Years

At this level, sometimes called kindergarten and reception (with students anywhere from 3 to 5 years old), our learners will not be used to the normal classroom. Indeed, the English classroom may be the first classroom experience they will have encountered. Learners will have limited motor skills and some will still be learning to use pens and scissors. Children will have few language capabilities and will not be able to analyse language. At this age a learner's reading and writing skills will be very limited – some students will be moving ahead, others will be unable to grasp a pencil properly. Also at this age students will not understand the need to communicate in English and will need to be entertained to stimulate learning, as they may find conventional topics boring and will switch off.



Therefore, as teachers we will need to be aware of what will work with these learners and what won't. We will need to lead the learning in a more holistic way, so songs, the opportunity to play, explore, touch and move will all be essential if we are successfully to lead our students forward into the language. The teacher will need to use a lot of L1 as students will have very limited English capability, so the teacher may well need a good command of the learner's language to be able to issue instructions and maintain discipline.

We may also have to help our learners with something as basic as holding a pen or pencil, so that some of the fun activities we have lined up (such as colouring) can be completed. Because our learners will have such limited ability with writing and reading, we will probably have to focus on the other skills. Therefore we may look to introduce several listening and speaking activities into our classroom, trying to give a fun introduction to English words.

Other activities that will also work well at this level include chants, songs, visual materials, stories and puppets etc. Our young learners will love stories, fairy tales and simple, fun activities which make their time in the classroom enjoyable. So games will also give our students an interest in learning the language. So if we can introduce some of these it may well have a positive impact too.

Early Primary School Years

Once our young learners get to the age of six, they start to become more analytical and logical in their thought processes. For the next two to three years they will begin to see patterns in their own language and will start having awareness about language. No doubt they will begin asking questions (if my seven year old is anything to go by!) and this will extend to the English classroom too as they search for answers to the 'What' and 'Why' questions. However, in English the reading and writing will most likely still be limited. Students at this age will still be learning to form characters and words in their own language. If English is another alphabet altogether (Greek, Russian or Chinese learners, for example) then this will be an additional complication. So your learners will still need help and support with this.



Social development may still have an impact on their ability to interact in a group setting, although this will be balanced by an ability to express themselves. As we know, students at this age are often less inhibited about what they say, so they may be more vocal and prepared to interact in class. I have to be reminded sometimes that my 7 year old actually knows more than I sometimes think she does. She is open to the influences of TV and the world around her. For our learners, if some of this includes English, then development with L1 may come more rapidly and progress can be seen quite quickly.

For the teacher, the above has many positive implications. On a simple level, we can do more with this group than we can with the pre-school age group. We will be able to guide them into more independent activities, where they can work alone or in small groups such as collage making or design, where all have an input. While remembering to keep careful control, our role is one of monitoring and being a facilitator, much as it is with adult group work activities. Learners at this age will be appreciative of the chance to show you what they can do so give them opportunities for this, always in a supportive atmosphere and with a lot of praise. Don't force them, as a bad experience can prove to be a significant setback. Reinforce their ability with a positive 'Well done!' even if the outcome hasn't been quite what you or they intended!

Late Primary School Years

Once students get towards the end of primary school, ahead of the move into secondary education (usually from 11 upwards), we find they quickly take on an increasing interest in the world around them. Mainstream schooling may already have an examination component by this age, so students will be conditioned to taking their learning more seriously and being tested on what they have studied. As their brains develop, they will have an increasing capacity to absorb and retain information. Attention spans will grow longer and we begin to see real development in intellectual and social skills.



Again, much of this development is positive for us and our English classes. We can organise a greater range of classroom activities and touch upon a wider variety of topics. But beware; sometimes questions can be more searching and complex, leading to a need to find an answer not necessarily within the scope of the English language lesson!

However, more focussed activities can be undertaken and with initial instruction and proper supervision, students can be left to work alone for longer periods. This gives them an opportunity to channel and focus their energies, working (at times) independently from you and the rest of the group. It gives them a real opportunity for individual learning, which will be successfully achieved, if you are in close proximity to give support as and when necessary. As a result of this, differences in learning speed will become more pronounced. You'll quickly find your more able language learners moving ahead of your less able ones. This will in turn lead to other issues that we have to address.

However, we need to remember that with these older primary learners, we are still dealing with children, who will all have different issues and fears. Becoming more conscious of those around them, some may start to become more introverted, afraid of speaking in case of getting it wrong, fearful of ridicule in front of an ever more important peer group. So the role of the teacher is especially important at this time. The need to understand the individual before us and how they see themselves within the group is crucial if we are to be successful in bringing students to their full potential at this level. Yes, we can challenge them more and many will enjoy being challenged by activities that stretch them, but do not expect all your students to react in the same way. It will be harder to get a 'group positive reaction' than it was with your pre-school learners – and the teacher at this level often has to put up with indifference and the commencement of early teen attitudes!

The secret with all our learner groups is flexibility. Sometimes you will achieve your lesson aims, sometimes you won't. Sometimes you will achieve them by a completely different method than you had anticipated. But you'll need to be current and up to date. No point trying to bring in a pop song listening from One Direction or the Spice Girls (aiming to cater to different generations of reader here); it will have to be something that is popular now. Which means your body of relevant material to support whatever course book they are following will have to be flexible and move with the times.

The following page is designed for those who want to explore this in more depth and detail. We have itemised a few of the resources which you may find helpful and we would recommend you follow these up if you are interested in finding out more about what makes the individuals in front of you tick.

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/activities-first-lessons-1>

Question 6 (3 marks)

So we will leave our brief look at the characteristics of young learners here. Before we do though, here is a question for you. We have looked at some of the characteristics of young learners, dividing them into three rough age categories. In some senses that's a little false, as there are cross-overs between these categories. However, in this question, we'd like to find out more about you're your preference for teaching. So, which group would you prefer to teach? Provide your answer in the Answer Booklet in around 100-150 words.

Go to Answer Booklet, Question 6

Further Research – Characteristics of Young Learners

1. If you are interesting in researching this area further, you may be interested in what Bronwyn Coltrane has to say on the issue in her article entitled **Working With Young English Language Learners: Some Considerations** which you can find here:

<http://www.ericdigests.org/2004-2/young.html>

This is a useful and thought provoking review which encapsulates a wide range of previous research from Chomsky, Greenburg and other important writers on this complex subject. Well worth a read.

2. For a more in-depth look at Young Learner characteristics, you may find the following title worthwhile. In '*How Languages are Learned*' (Third Edition) by Spada and Lightbown, you can find out about different learner characteristics and learn more on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). For details on the title, see the following link: <http://tesl-ej.org:80/ej03/r19.html>

Additionally the following survey of language learner beliefs makes for interesting reading:

<http://www.accessola2.com/superconference2007/fri/1103/survey.doc>

3. For a broader outline on young learner development, Annamaria Pinter has provided a useful list on the different characteristics of both younger learners and teenagers in the introduction to her book 'Teaching Young Language Learners' (Oxford, ISBN 978-0-19-442207-9), page 2.