

# Development of Methods of Teaching English for Thai Students with Learning Difficulties

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## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to develop methods of teaching English for Thai students with learning difficulties. The process of learning language has a significant effect on how young learners are able to acquire the foreign language. As was presented, the strategy of learning one's mother tongue can be adopted for learning a foreign language. Primarily, those who are involved in the children's learning process are their parents, and later their teachers. Therefore, teachers should use deliberate strategies that parents generally use quite intuitively to promote young learners' development of a foreign language. Practicing these strategies and developing motivation can help learners overcome problems with foreign language acquisition.

**Keywords:** Development; Methods of teaching English; Learning difficulties

## Introduction

In terms of globalization it is necessary to learn foreign languages and therefore they are on the school curriculum. Generally, foreign languages are taught at the basic schools although there are some kindergartens where pre-school children are introduced to a foreign language.

When children first acquire the new foreign language their reaction to the encounter is various, mainly, because it is more or less unlike their native language. The foreign language has very often different structure, rules, system etc. What happens is that some children easily cope with the language, some need time to do so and some struggle with it from the beginning.

Those who start to have difficulties with the foreign language can be either children who have a learning disability or those who do not have any disability but still show learning difficulties in the foreign language. (Ing. Andrea Holešinská, 2006:6)

As far as the bachelor thesis is concerned, its purpose is to consider young learners at the age of 10 – 12 who were not diagnosed with a learning disability but still have significant difficulties learning a foreign language.

This study is focused on the analysis of teaching methods that can help and support Thai young learners with learning difficulties in English. The above mentioned analysis is partly grounded on a hypothesis that the teaching process and methods that are practised teaching children with learning disabilities can be adopted to support young learners with learning difficulties to master English as a foreign language from the beginning of their studies.



Finally, the aim of the study is to provide practical examples of methods (materials) that would improve and encourage Thai young learners to acquire English as a foreign language with minimum difficulties.

### **1. Process of learning languages**

Before analyzing teaching methods that can help and support young learners with learning difficulties in English as a foreign language, the main attention should be drawn to the process of learning language in general.

Very interesting results were revealed by Joan Tough, (1979: 210) who has a lifetime's experience in language teaching as a primary school teacher. Her research and her practice show that there is a connection between learning one's mother tongue and learning a foreign language.

*The fact that young children learn their first language with such speed and competence must mean that if the process can be better understood it should be possible to design experiences through which children learn a second language in much the same way as they learn their first language. (Tough 213)*

The explanation can be seen in "the potential for social and cognitive development" (Tough 213) during the children's early years. Children's potential broadens as the interaction with others, mainly with parents, is intensive and children experience the language. This communication is initially based on children's non-verbal reactions (e.g. gestures, facial expression, actions and vocalizations) and later the first verbal responses are presented. The stage of verbal communication is preceded by a long process of gaining experiences.

Concerning learning foreign language there are obvious similar steps that must be followed as with acquiring the mother tongue. Therefore, it is important to support communication through the use of gesture, facial expression and action because this gives children clues to the meaning of what they hear and so draws their attention to and helps them to become familiar with the sounds, rhythms and stress of the second language which are different from those of their first language. (Tough 221)

According to methodology there are plenty of teaching methods that can be applied in the education process however not all of them are effective, in terms of young learners with learning difficulties, and can guarantee their success in learning English.

### **2. Teaching principles**

Before identifying appropriate teaching techniques that would help young learners with their learning difficulties certain teaching principles or strategies, that enable teacher to create suitable conditions for students to acquire a foreign language easily, should be mentioned:

- Systematic approach
- Predictable and friendly environment
- Motivation
- Interventions (accommodation and modification)
- Clear instructions
- Review

The most important teaching principle is the systematic approach that is based on structured or sequential (step-by-step) teaching, see the Comenius's quotation. Then the teacher should provide a predictable, consistent and friendly environment to support their children and let them feel comfortable in lessons. Hand in hand with support comes motivation that is used to encourage students to learn English. Particularly for young learners with learning difficulties, it is essential to apply so called interventions such as accommodation and modification (Jacob and Bailey, 1996:72). Another significant principle is the clarity of instructions which means that all directions should be explicit and, even better, both orally and visually presented. Last but not least is review and regular repetition that vitally help children to acquire what they have learnt.

The above list of teaching principles is not complete. What could be added is for example "time supply" which means that the teacher gives the children sufficient time to do a task.

### **3. Teaching techniques**

In spite of the fact that an object of the thesis are young learners with learning difficulties who have not been classified as learning disabled, this chapter deals with the teaching techniques that are highly recommended for teaching LD students. It is not coincidental that from the large scale of teaching techniques were chosen those that are practised with LD students. As several researchers show it is not easy for the teacher to differentiate between students with learning disabilities and those with learning difficulties (sometimes called "slow learners").

According to an article published by The International Dyslexia Association (Ganshow and Schneider, 2005:140) many students have difficulties learning a new language system. This does not mean that they are dyslexic or that they have a learning disability. Just as there are some students who have particular strengths in math, science, or any other discipline, some students have particular strengths in learning languages.

The teacher should be aware of this and whenever they realize the students' weaknesses (difficulties) be able to provide appropriate pedagogical help (teaching method) as otherwise these difficulties start to pile up and later on they can have a negative influence on young learners.

One result of accumulating difficulties can be following: even when young learners try to do their best at English lessons, they are not successful. This failure causes them stress and, slowly or quickly, they lose their self-confidence and self-esteem.

Thus, the teacher should know how to prevent pupils with these difficulties from experiencing problems and show them a way to manage to accommodate the language.

Among the most efficient ways (teaching methods) that the teacher can apply are: Multi-sensory techniques, Metacognition, Total Physical Response (TPR), discovery techniques and presentation techniques.



### 3.1 Presentation techniques

The latter mentioned method uses different objects (instruments) in the classroom to create connections between “abstract” vocabulary and “real” things. Thus these techniques help to build learners background knowledge with using their senses to learn about a given subject.

Among the presentation techniques belong:

- Realia - real objects are used as examples
- Pictures - explaining the meaning of vocabulary items through pictures
- Mime, action and gesture – this technique uses a human body to express for example grammatical points, verbs or tenses
- Contrast - presenting the meaning of a certain word by contrasting it with the opposite one
- Enumeration - general and specific meaning of words
- Explanation - giving a definition
- Translation – the easiest technique but not productive

An important part of presentation techniques (introducing new words) is pronunciation which should not be underestimated.

### 3.2 Total Physical Response (TPR)

This technique was first invented in 1960s by James Asher, an American professor of psychology. This technique is based on command activities. The teacher gives verbal comprehensible stimulus (instructions) and students act or (physically) respond according to it. The method shows the evidence of the input and output of the learning process. The students thus learn language through actions rather than through drills.

Concerning the students’ output reaction, their “understanding” is predominantly expressed by acting and speaking skill is stifled. This characteristic of TPR can be employed for very young learners who cannot yet make a whole sentence in foreign language but they understand due to context.

As well as the advantage of the technique can be taken when students have a so called ‘silent period’, which means that they do not speak but respond in a different way, e.g. pointing to a picture, performing, gesturing or nodding or just responding with a simple “yes” or “no” to express that they understand and participate in the lesson.

### 3.3 Discovery techniques

The most practical and encouraging example of active learning are discovery techniques that are based on the fact that students have to work out rules and meanings for themselves. These techniques used allow students to activate their previous knowledge and to share what they know. By involving students with words, it is likely to help them to learn and remember them. In other words, students discover the ways in which the language works and they learn through this process the function of language therefore these techniques are valuable.

Moreover, this technique has a good pedagogical and methodological effect on students because they are more involved in the learning process and are aware of language and how it is used, which is why discovery techniques are also called “awareness activities”.

The main discovery techniques are: matching tasks, mind mapping, word in context, gap filling etc.

The matching discovery activities are based on labeling pictures or things. Students are asked to match pictures with appropriate words. If they do not know the words, they look up their meaning in a bilingual dictionary, which helps them to do correct combinations, or students can work in pairs or groups to help each other with the unknown words.

The second mentioned discovery technique is the mind mapping activity. Mind mapping helps students to group words according to their characteristics and their relations, so students create a spidergram that express links between the words.

The “word in context” activity is very suitable for advanced students because they learn the meaning of certain words through a text. The information in the text works as background that helps students to deduct the proper meaning of the words.

The further mentioned activity gap filling or fill-in passage is an alternation to the previous activity. Students are given a text with missing words (gaps) and they have to think of a suitable word that would fit into the gap. As a help for young learners the gaps in the text are provided with pictures.

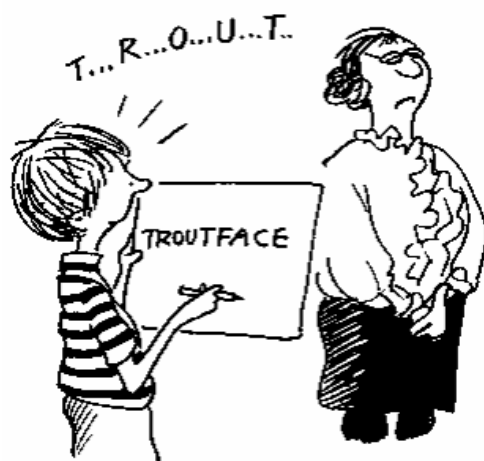
### **3.4 Multi-sensory techniques**

The most commonly used approach that benefits young learners who have difficulties learning a foreign language is multi-sensory techniques. These techniques focus on teaching students through all sensory channels (auditory, visual and tactile/kinaesthetic), which generally helps to support their weaker channels by using their stronger ones. This method is sensible for teaching pronunciation, spelling, reading and other skills. Besides the multisensory technique enables young learners to consciously memorise and retrieve information.

Schneider and Crombie (2003:82) announced a motto of multi-sensory techniques that is ‘Hear it, see it, say it, write it, act it out’ and make learning as active as possible.

Some practical examples of multi-sensory techniques: simultaneous oral spelling, tracing sandpaper numbers/letters, writing with a finger into sand or on someone’s back etc.

The technique of simultaneous oral spelling consists of five steps. Firstly a young learner says a word, which means in terms of sensory input that the student hears and feels himself saying the word. Then the young learner spells the word aloud and doing this he hears the sequence of letters within the word. As a third step, the student writes down the word saying the letters aloud and as a result of this he hears the letters again and as well as feels his hand write the letters’ shapes. The final step is checking what was written. This step employs the visual channel because the young learner sees the word appear on the page and then compare it with the original.



**Figure: 1 Simultaneous oral spelling-illustrative picture** (Source: Townend, 2006)

Multi-sensory techniques are employed to integrate the learning of the sound of a letter, its shape on the written page and the feel of writing it in cursive script, so that a secure sound-symbol relationship is established for reading and spelling. (Townend, 2006)

The other example of multi-sensory techniques - tracing sandpaper numbers or letters moreover involves the tactile channel, which means that not only seeing numbers and hearing them but also feeling their shapes (that is way it is used sandpaper) helps the young learner to make a parallel link between the symbol (number or letter) and its sound.

### 3.5 Metacognition

In a sophisticated way, metacognition can be defined as “instructional approaches emphasizing awareness of the cognitive processes that facilitate one’s own learning and its application to academic and work assignments”. (Lokerson, 1992:42)

Typical metacognitive techniques include systematic rehearsal of steps or conscious selection among strategies for completing a task, and thus students are aware of learning as a process and of what will facilitate learning. Schneider and Crombie (2003:97) called metacognition a technique that provides “problem-solving strategies”.

In my consideration, metacognition is a method that can be generously used and be more successful when teaching older learners who have a certain degree of knowledge and have mastered cognitive strategies of learning foreign language.

#### Mnemonic devices

Schneider and Crombie (2003:78) offer useful mnemonic devices that support metacognitive, actually metalinguistic, skills and thus help students remember and retrieve information more easily (sometimes in a humorous way).

Here is a list of mnemonic devices (Schneider and Crombie 32-42):

- Sound clues – help the memorization and recall of pronunciation patterns and vocabulary (example: the student links the letter sound with a cultural-semantic association in the first language /to improve pronunciation/ – skirt = sukně x shirt = košile)

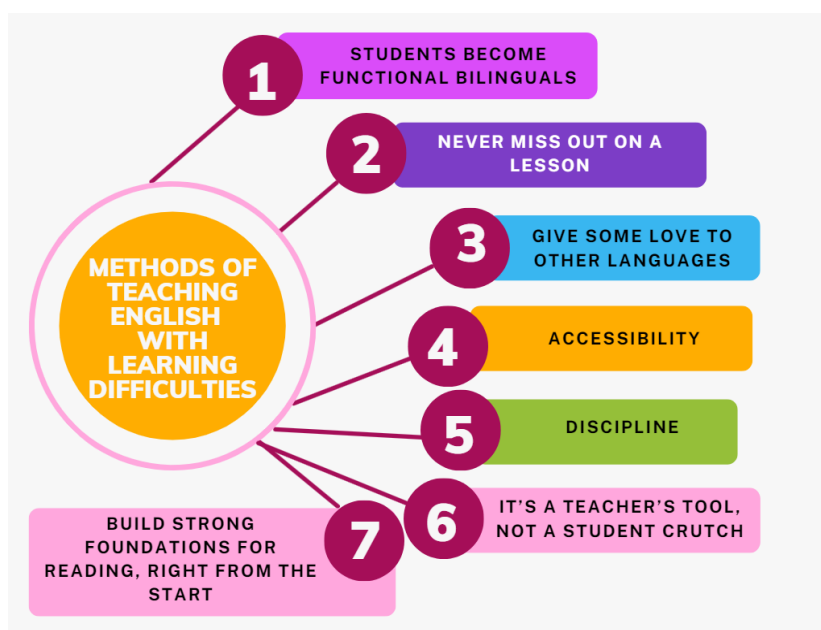
- Letter-shape clues – help memorize and recall spelling patterns (non-phonetic words or word parts) and vocabulary (example: linking the letter shape of the letter that causes spelling problems with an association in the first language or an important keyword that entails it – such as sounds {p} and {b}; {p} = ‘top’ part is rounded, {b} = ‘bottom’ part is rounded)
- Crazy stories – difficult spelling words are integrated in groups of up to five in a story that students make up individually (the crazier the story and the shorter, the better for later retrieval) – good to illustrate with picture mnemonics (example: ‘When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking.’ – beat, boat, read etc.; ‘My Very Easy Method Just Speeds Up Naming Planets’ = Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto)
- Picture clues – visual illustrations done by student or by teacher help memorize and recall difficult new vocabulary and class activities (example see figure 2)



**Figure: 2 Picture clue-example** (Source: Fergusson, 1992 (the cover of the books))

- Acronyms – the letters of an entire word each stand for a concept to memorize and recall (e.g., a syllable pattern or study device) (example: KISS = Keep It Short and Simple).
- Keywords – (belong to the learners’ active vocabulary) help retrieve pronunciation of letters, meanings of words or sequences of a grammatical pattern; a keyword sentence helps to memorize and recall syllable patterns of learning steps.
- Songs and sounds – a melody or entire song helps memorize and recall pronunciation, vocabulary or grammar – a sound helps recall specific language patterns (e.g., sentence structure) (example: reminding a young learner of missing ending –s in singular present tense the teacher uses the sound of hissing snake).
- Gesture and motion clues – signals meaning or a pronunciation, spellchecker or reading comprehension rule (example of gesture to remind about spellchecker rule – finger-tapping technique, which is tapping one finger per sound in a syllable)
- Personalization – an abstract concept is ‘personalized’ with characteristics of a human being, animal, flora or fauna.

## Knowledge from the Study



1.  
become  
bilinguals

Students  
functional

If the aim of language learning is ultimately for the student to become fully bilingual (or multilingual) then this method models this positive outcome from the very beginning. As the students begin their language learning journey, their destination is visible in their language teacher. The competence and confidence of the teacher as she moves from L1 to L2 and back again is a clear model for the student to emulate.

### 2. Never miss out on a lesson

Rather than being a hindrance, advocates of the bilingual method argue that the mother tongue of the students is the greatest resource in the language learning process. This is true particularly for those students over the age of 7 or 8, when the mother tongue has been firmly established in the students' minds. The bilingual method allows easy glossing of difficult words and efficient explanations of points of grammar. Time saved in this manner optimizes learning opportunities.

### 3. Give some love to other languages

While English, with an estimated 328 million speakers, is the third most widely spoken language in the world, it's perhaps first in terms of prestige. For this reason, students worldwide are clamoring to learn it. This is good news for English language teachers. However, there are inherent dangers for languages considered less prestigious.

The French linguist Claude Hagege argues, "If we aren't cautious about the way English is progressing it may eventually kill most other languages."

An important aspect of the bilingual method is the acknowledgement it gives to the importance and the validity of the student's L1 language and culture. Language learning is one of the most enriching experiences we can have as human beings. It isn't merely the substitution



of one means of communication for another. It's a celebration of the diversity that exists in the world and we would be infinitely poorer with it. *Vive le différence!*

#### **4. Accessibility**

The bilingual method ensures accessibility. Students beginning the daunting task of learning a new language can immediately find a level of familiarity, avoiding the terrors of that “deer in the headlights” stage of acquiring new skills.

Through the use of the mother tongue, meaning is conveyed efficiently and the teacher can ensure that concepts have really been grasped, adapting the pace of the lesson accordingly.

#### **5. Discipline**

Many fresh-faced English language teachers landing on exotic shores with a shiny new TEFL certificate struggle with this one. An oft-heard complaint among foreign teachers is that they aren't afforded the respect given to the local teachers.

Learning the local language can be a sure-fire way to improve your behavior management skills. Expectations can be made explicit from the beginning when you have the ability to speak the students' L1. It'll also aid in ensuring smooth transitions between lesson activities, ensuring best use is made of the time available.

You can get into the details of language much more deeply than you can if you only speak English. If you can explain concepts in the students' L1, then newcomers to English will be able to grasp the more complex statements you'll want to make about grammar and vocabulary use. All in all, you'll be able to get your students farther, faster.

#### **6. It's a teacher's tool, not a student crutch**

Though the bilingual method employs the students' native language, it's important to note that it's predominantly the teacher who makes use of L1. This distinguishes it from the grammar-translation method which relies more on rote learning and the translation of texts.

The bilingual method focuses more on using the language for oral communication. Students won't be using their native tongue much in the classroom.

#### **7. Build strong foundations for reading, right from the start**

As with the direct method, basic texts make use of picture strips to accompany the dialogue. The bilingual method makes use of the written form of the language from the start. This allows students to begin to see the shapes of words as they repeat them orally.

### **Conclusion**

Primarily the teaching principles (structured, sequential, cumulative, repetitive, instructions, motivation, environment) should be taken into consideration because they work as valuable facilitators in the education process. Then the second factor is the good choice and application of teaching techniques.



Among the most useful techniques that are also practised with LD students are namely presentation techniques, total physical response, discovery techniques, multi-sensory techniques and metacognition. All of these techniques offered a wide range of activities that stimulate and involve students in the learning process.

Multi-sensory techniques, discovery techniques and metacognition are useful teaching techniques concerning young learners with learning difficulties. The advantage of multisensory techniques is involving all students' senses into the learning process through using the stronger channels to support the weaker ones. These techniques facilitate the students' brain to create besides the visual and auditory memories the tactile and kinetic ones. In terms of discovery techniques, the advantage is in the self-discovery or awareness process when young learners tackle tasks on their own and thus they learn through what they have detected by themselves. As well as metacognition has its benefits, more precisely mnemonic devices that help a lot to encourage and support young learners to overcome their problems with foreign language.

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