

EXPLORING REALIA USAGE IN TEACHING ENGLISH GRAMMAR TO YOUNG LEARNERS

Le Thi Ngoc Diep

Lethingocdiep@vanlanguni.edu.vn

Abstract

This study is a partial systematic look about the use of realia in teaching and learning grammar to young learners (from 6 to 11 years old) in public schools in Vietnam. It also offers a depiction of the problems that teachers and children had to face. The article focuses on exploring children's expectation in grammar classes as well as how to manage those classes in a more effective and enjoyable way. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches is applied to collect data for studying. It is found out realia, in some cases, cannot be considered as a perfect aid to gain children's understanding in explaining some grammar points.

Key words: realia, grammar, young learners, teaching method

Introduction

Children are born with a natural appetite and interest for learning, and their desire to learn should be fueled when they begin school (Cameron, 2001). Teachers have the most important roles in creating an encouraging emotional atmosphere in the classroom. Thus, a cooperative rather than competitive atmosphere (especially including a winner and some physical reward) works better with young learners (Scott & Ytreberg, 2001). The students should feel that they are winning and having fun altogether. However, this should not be understood as enjoying with little learning but should be learning by enjoying. Children especially have fun with movement and physical participation, and the more fun they have the better they will remember the language (Shin, 2006).

However, the need to understand grammar makes tasks more complicated. As cited in Thornbury (1999) that no man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled with grammar precepts. Grammar is important for learners who want to master their language. But teaching grammar has always been one of the most controversial and least understood aspects of language teaching (Thornbury, 1999). Grammar is a description of the rules that govern how sentences are formed. Learners, especially the younger ones, consider it an obstacle to the study of English.

Despite of many ways to teach grammar to young learners, this study is aimed at examining whether realia is one of the effective ways. Ur (1996) stated that children have a great immediate need to be motivated by the teacher or the materials. There is no denying that it is effective for them to have something eye-catching to look at and relevant to the task at hand. And realia is useful for both touching and visualization. In reality, many teachers understand the need of using visual teaching aids, but they are not clear of know how to use them to manage the lessons effectively. This case study was conducted in Vietnam to examine how realia works in grammar classes. The purpose is to answer this question: To what extent and how effective has realia been used to teach grammar to young learners?

Literature Review

How realia works with children in English classes?

As identified by Celce-Murcia & Hilles (1988), realia are objects of any origin used to illustrate vocabulary and structure in language teaching. The use of realia is commonplace in the ESL/EFL (English as a Second Language/ English as a Foreign Language) classroom and is widely considered to have great value in fostering an active teaching-learning environment. By presenting information through diverse media, realia helps to make English language input as comprehensible as possible and to build "an associative bridge between the classroom and the world" (Heaton, 1979).

As Berwald (1987) noted, realia "are not only a series of artifacts that describe the customs and traditions of a culture, but they are also a set of teaching aids that facilitate the simulation of experience in the target culture". Realia provides language learners with multi-sensory impressions of the language which, as Rivers (1983) stated is "learned partly at least through seeing, hearing, touching, and manipulating" items. And interaction with authentic materials aids

in contextually grounding instruction by bringing students into contact with language as it is used in the target culture in order to meet actual communication needs. The use of realia, then, can enhance linguistic and cultural comprehensibility, which are both prerequisites for real language learning.

Hess & Sklarew (1994) also highlighted that learners can explore aspects of grammar which are expressed in everyday realia items such as an advertisement or the cover of a magazine. And realia like greeting cards can provide great vocabulary and grammar structures in the form of puns, idioms, and slang. They can also serve as a springboard for a discussion of underlying cultural values, beliefs, and behavior as well as provide an often non-language-dependent means of introducing students to the lesson topic (Short, 1991). Further, evidence showed that through the use of realia teachers may increase the number of student responses (Waltz, 1986) and, therefore, overall participation and interest in learning activities.

In this respect Total Physical Response Method (TPR) developed by Dr. James J. Asher, a professor of psychology at San José State University, California, required the children to listen and physically respond to a series of instructions from the teacher (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Involving students in making visuals and craft activities (such as painting, making puppets, origami, play doughs etc.), realia can be physically satisfying for the young learners as well (Shin, 2006). When possible other activities can also be embedded with physical movements, a singing activity, for example, can be coupled with dancing easily, or a story can be transformed into role-play activity though teachers should be careful not to keep the tempo of the lessons at a stable pace. That is, activities should not always be physical and fast or vice versa. A variety of activities with different paces and tempos are necessary since children have a short attention span (Scott & Ytreberg, 2001). Hart and Risley (1975) found that learning language occurs naturally when children are given the opportunities to converse and learn from adults in naturally, stimulating environments.

Children tend to have shorter attention spans and a lot of physical energy. They are very much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible phenomena. As Scott and Ytreberg (2001) described, “their own understanding comes through hands and

eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times.” According to Harmer (2007), young learners learn differently from adult learners. They easily get bored, losing interest after a short period of time. In order to keep them engaged it is necessary to supplement the activities with lots of brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets, or realia. A language teacher can make the language input enjoyable and comprehensible using these activities. A great teaching idea is to collect useful resources of toys, puppets, pictures, maps, calendars, and other paraphernalia and saving them for use in each class. Using gestures and body language are also very effective for young learners to gain understanding of language and to keep them active and motivated.

Problems of teaching grammar to children

For grammatical teaching, this distinctive pattern was observable in the shift from the more form-oriented grammar translation approach to the use-oriented direct method early in the previous century (Celce-Murcia, 1988). Equating grammar with form and the teaching of grammar with the teaching of explicit linguistic rules concerning form are unduly limiting, representing what we have called myths (Larsen-Freeman, 2001), which only serve to perpetuate the pendulum swing between language form and language use. Grammar is about forms and one way to teach forms is to give students rules. However, grammar is about much more than forms, and the teaching method is ill served if students are simply given rules.

Learning a second language must be similar to learning the first language, where the process of listening goes before speaking. In this way, communicative skills are developed in a natural and spontaneous way. However, Vietnamese teachers who are used to explaining new structures before teaching pupils to communicate, may add, in small doses, traditional Vietnamese activities such as introducing phonetic transcription, drilling isolated sounds, as well as learning rules. Teaching young learners is a very demanding issue that needs consideration. Research in Turkey has shown that only 35% of pre-service teachers of English believe that their teacher education curriculum prepare them as effective teachers of English that can teach young learners successfully (Özkan & Arikan, 2010). Nedomová (2007) argued that “young learners are not able to pay their attention for more than 10-20 minutes and after that they start to be bored and tired.” Especially when grammar teaching is too dependent on rules and memorization, they start to lose their interest and motivation. Teachers know that young learners like being physically

active as they learn by doing. Moreover, they are imaginative and creative and they learn without being aware of it. Besides, young learners use their previous experience, knowledge, several skills, and abilities which help the teacher present the new information by enabling children to practice the new knowledge on top of their previous knowledge (Nedomová, 2007). Simply sitting them down and explaining rules is not an option because they possess certain characteristics that make their learning different from that of adults. In an ESL classroom, young learners are in a setting in which they are surrounded by language. The second language is made meaningful because of the context and because of the way teachers speak to them. They have time to sort out the language that they hear and understand. When they are ready, they begin to use it to express themselves. Adults, on the other hand, usually focus more on learning vocabulary and grammar rules and they make an effort to apply those rules later.

Hashemi (2008) supports the use of thematic unit planning for young foreign language learners by highlighted that foreign language instruction for children can be enriched when teachers use thematic units focus on content area information, engage students in activities in which they must think critically, and provide opportunities for them to use the target language in meaningful and new contexts. A good way to plan a unit is to explore what content your students are learning in their other classes and develop English lessons using similar content. Since children easily make links to their home cultures, it has always been a good idea to link the language and content to students' lives and personalize the lesson to their experiences. Teachers should remember that children enjoy repetition any time and any place and practice basic routines in the classroom are recommended from the beginning. According to Cameron (2001), "we can see how classroom routines happen every day may provide opportunities for language development." Most of the teachers today are encouraged to teach English through English, especially at the younger ages. One reason is to give students the maximum exposure to the English language while using their mother tongue is the last choice of explaining the meaning of some expressions or words clearly in a shorter period of time. We are usually given a limited amount of time in many classroom situations, so that time is too precious to waste. To make the meaning of the new words comprehensible, the teacher can use visuals, realia, and gestures.

Challenges for teachers and children

Today, more and more attention is given to communicative approaches in ESL teaching. With the emergence of universal education, and the extremely rapid development of information and communication technology (ICT), grammatical communication became the primary goal for foreign language learners. We live in time when information technologies play a very important role in education. Its usage in foreign language teaching raises motivation, facilitates students' cognitive abilities and helps to create a favorable psychological atmosphere in the classroom. This approach gives greater flexibility for language acquisition. Children find language learning stressful when the classroom can be a place of some discomfort. An adult has only to put herself in the same situation with a language alien to her to realize that the activity involves pressure to perform, pressure to 'get it right', little chance to relax, the stress of launching into a sea of the unknown. Everything seems to happen quickly in many language lessons. The teacher speeds from activity to activity, with scarcely a pause for breath or wait time, often giving children only limited time to respond to a question or prompt. To this can be added the peer-group pressures already described and the fact that children, unlike adults, do not necessarily choose to study a foreign language. Pupils are often unaware of what exactly is expected of them and why. They may not see how tasks fit into the general scheme of things, where they are leading and what their point is. (Cajkler & Addelman, 2012).

Teaching of English to young learners brings a number of challenges most of which stem from the characteristics of young learners that are different from those of older learners (Cameron, 2003). Hence, taking these characteristics into account while determining the language instruction is of most important. Young learners tend to learn implicitly rather than explicitly (Cameron, 2001). They can understand meaningful messages, but cannot analyze the language as a system yet. Within this line, it is a crucial need to present and use the language within 'meaningful contexts' reflecting the authentic use of language (Halliwel, 1992). As in Arikan's review of research articulated (2009), although all grammar teaching is contextual at differing degrees, it is expected that "the teacher can contextualize the lesson through numerous methods including using audio or visual materials, bringing in realia and props, storytelling, problem solving, giving examples, showing grammar usage, playing games, and teaching explicitly or implicitly". Children are good observers and they make use of such contextual clues like

movements (body language), intonation, mimics and gestures, actions and messages in order to understand and interpret the language itself

Young learners enjoy having exciting classes in which games and realia suit well in fostering their imagination and fantasy (Pinter, 2006). The rationale behind choosing cartoons and realia as teaching materials rather than pictures or stories is that they contain colorful characters and catchy visual presentations accompanied by enjoyable sounds and music (Bishop & Cates, 2001). Teachers are interested in using animations while teaching all kinds of subjects (Kristiansen, 2001). In spite of the overall support for animations, there are few studies which reveal effects of using cartoons on enhancing learning or attitudes of learners (Kristiansen, 2001). Traditional methods which attribute the teacher a central role and the learners a passive role and present an explicit and de-contextualized language instruction which is not appropriate for the characteristics and needs of young learners and teachers are not satisfied with the results obtained through traditional methods (Nunan, 1999).

Methodology

This paper was conducted via a mix method of quantitative and qualitative approaches. 255 students in four classes were non-participated observed to find out to which extent realia was used and how effectively to teach grammar structures to children. Participated observing was also conducted in two classes which have the same background. The author taught grammar, corrected homework and observed the process.

Unstructured interviews in this study were focused on ascertaining the practical perspective of teachers on the use of realia to teach grammar. There were 10 teachers (9 Vietnamese and 1 foreigner) chosen at random. They had taught young learners for at least two years. All of the interviews were about 25 minutes and face-to-face. All related information was recorded for later analysis. The focus was on matters of (1) whether they used realia in class, (2) how they use realia teach grammar to young learners, and (3) how effective it was.

Questionnaires were sent to 177 students chosen at random from four classes. All data was transformed into numerical values to be analyzed with descriptive statistics. The first two

questions aimed at searching the needs of young learners when they studied English. The next two questions examined students' attitude towards the grammar structures they had studied in class. The fifth question was used to determine young learners' problems in studying grammar. The sixth question was used to investigate how realia is used in class. The responses to the seventh question measured young learners' attitudes and expectations towards the realia which their teachers used in class. Finally, in the last question, young learners shared their personal opinions after every class. Children need to make sure they completely understand the questions with their teachers' help before answering.

Results and Discussion

According to 0% of classes (Table 4.1) where middle-aged teachers did not use any realia and only 25% of classes (Table 4.2) used realia prepared at home to present structures, the teachers generally did not concern themselves with using real objects to teach grammar to young learners. Three-fourths of young teachers applied real objects when those things are available in the classroom or at the kiddy corner. There was no denying the truth that realia could get children's attention and interest since they had special things to look at and touch. However, through observations, realia was only an effective teaching aid in teaching simple structures, not in complex structures because these learners were young and their English comprehension was not good enough to understand teachers' explanation.

The results from the questionnaires showed that young learners are happy with their studying. They had good attitude towards studying grammar, especially studying with real objects (51.4%). However, since realia was not used regularly in grammar lessons, children preferred to see their teachers model the examples.

Kinds of structures	Young teachers (4 classes – 8 hours)		Middle-aged teachers (2 classes – 4 hours)	
	<i>Time/Number of classes</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Time/Number of classes</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Preposition	8 hours (4 classes)	100%	2 hours (1 class)	50%

Comparison	6 hours (3 classes)	75%	2 hours (1 class)	50%
Countable & Uncountable Nouns	6 hours (3 classes)	75%	0 class	0%

Table 4.1: *Difference between young teachers and middle-aged teachers*

Kinds of realia	Realia available in class		Realia from the kiddy corner		Realia prepared at home	
	Number of classes	Percent	Number of classes	Percent	Number of classes	Percent
Young teachers (total=4)	4	100%	3	75%	1	25%
Middle-aged teachers (total=2)	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%

Table 4.2: *Kinds of realia used in observed classes*

According to the interview, 100% of the teachers agreed that using realia takes time and energy to design and prepare if these items were not available in the classroom (Table 4.3). Moreover, using realia to present structures to young learners can cause other problems. Students sometimes focus too much on the objects. Frequently the circumstances are limited and it is very hard to apply to complex structures. However, there are some good points in using this method. For example, real objects are very concrete, so the teachers can easily gain the kids' interest easily. They will remember well if they are able to see and touch real things. In addition, realia is frequently available in classrooms. Most of these teachers loved using realia to teach vocabulary or review previous lessons. They all agreed that realia was effective in explaining simple structures like prepositions because real objects could help children imagine the situations. Learners in these classes were too young to understand the complicated situations. Realia and explanation in these cases did not work well. What the teachers had to do was to write down the examples and ask for repetition.

Advantages	Teachers mentioning <i>(10 interviewees)</i>	Percent
– Concrete	10	100%
– Avoiding to get bored	10	100%
– Remembering	4	40%
– Being available	2	20%
Disadvantages		
– Time and energy consuming	10	100%
– Too much focus on the objects	1	10%
– Hard to apply with the complex structures	2	20%

Table 4.3: *The advantages and disadvantages of using realia*

The data in table 4.3 also shows these following results:

Advantages

- Real objects are very concrete, so the teachers can easily gain the kids’ interest. They will remember well if they are able to see and touch real things.
- Realia is frequently available in classrooms. Most of these teachers love using realia to teach vocabulary or review previous lessons, not grammar.
- Young learners have good attitude towards studying grammar, especially studying with real objects (51.4%). However, since realia was not used regularly in grammar lessons, children preferred to see their teachers model the examples.

Disadvantages

- Using realia takes time and energy to design and prepare if these items are not available in the classroom.
- Children sometimes focus too much on the objects, not the implied study points.
- It is very hard to apply to complex structures (only 25% were used in simple grammar lessons).

Realia, in general, is a useful teaching aid to create children's imagination. This is a way to show children how languages link to the real world. Moreover, it can touch their interest and gain a certain understanding. Therefore, the preparation before grammar class requires lots of efforts and love from teachers. Combined published researches from different contexts (Cameron 2001, Lightbound & Spada 1999, Lojova 2005) show that children who experience an early start benefit most in listening comprehension and pronunciation, however, learning systematically grammar of the language seems to be harder due to the underdeveloped abstract thinking of early learners. Cameron (2001) highlights that receptive skills are likely to remain ahead of productive skills, and grammatical knowledge which is linked not just to the language development but to cognitive development is likely to develop more slowly for younger learners. Consideration about this fact should be taken not only when planning activities for young language learners but also when selecting which area should indicate the progress made. This seems to cause a lot of confusion, especially among teachers of lower level who take over young learners and feel there should be a lot to build on.

Nowadays, language teachers of adults are required to teach classes of children most of whom without any specialized training. Teaching English to children should be enjoyable, interesting, repetitive and understandable. In doing so, there should be appropriate methods and techniques for teaching English to them. When someone becomes a teacher of children, he or she is no longer just a language teacher. He or she is also an educator.

CONCLUSIONS

Grammar structures are mostly abstract to young learners. Realia, in some cases, cannot be considered as a perfect aid to gain children's understanding. In order to explain those to young learners, teachers need to combine many teaching aids together, such as pictures, real objects, cards, stories, etc. The combination of visual aids can be useful in transferring grammar knowledge. The rule is that everything needs to be flexible. Realia can, and should be used at all class levels. But the way it is utilized will depend upon the ages of students. More realia may be employed in the teaching of younger students because its function is to generate interests and hold attention. Older students will generally be learning the more complicated grammar

structures which are not easily demonstrated through real objects. This idea implies that most of teachers' effort must be based on the needs and abilities of the young learners.

When giving a new structure, teachers must clarify it and find better ways to eliminate confusion between various structures. Children's greatest concern is how to distinguish the structures. Although children can use the structures during repetition drills, this method cannot help them easily distinguish the differences and the uses of grammar structures. Children in these ages are too young to understand much theoretical explanation. Therefore, real objects are appreciated to be used together with pictures or other aids to teach structures. This requires a great deal of devotion and patience.

REFERENCE

Arikan, A. (2009). Environmental peace education in foreign language learners' English grammar lessons. *Journal of Peace Education*, 6(1), 87– 99.

Berwald, J. (1987). *Teaching Foreign Languages with Realia and Other Authentic Materials*. Q & As. Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages 1-6.

Bishop, M. J., & Cates, W. M. (2001). Theoretical foundations for sound's use in multimedia instruction to enhance learning. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 49(3), 5– 22.

Cajkler, W. & Addelman, R. (2012). *The Practice of Foreign Language Teaching*. Routledge.

Cameron, L. (2001). *Teaching languages to young learners*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cameron, L. (2003). Challenges for ELT from the expansion in teaching children. *ELT Journal*, 57(2), 105-112.

Celce-Murcia, M. & Hilles, S. (1988). *Techniques and Resources in Teaching Grammar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Larsen-Freeman, D. (2001). *Teaching Language: From Grammar to Gramming*. Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.

Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1999). *How Languages are Learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. (4th ed.) Harlow: Pearson Longman Limited.

Hart, B., & Risley, T.R. (1975). Incidental Teaching of Language in the Preschool. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Analysis*. 8, 411-420.

Hashemi, M., (2008). *Techniques in Teaching English to Children*, Oral presentation, Islamic Azad University, Toyserkan Branch, Iran.

McHugh, L., & Reed, P. (2008). Using Relational Frame Theory to build grammar in children with Autistic Spectrum Conditions. *The Journal of Speech – Language Pathology and Applied Behavioral Analysis*. Special consolidated issue, 2.4 - 3.1, 60-77. Retrieved April 29, 2013, from http://www.academia.edu/205706/Using_Relational_Frame_Theory_to_build_grammar_in_children_with_Autistic_Spectrum_Conditions.

Halliwell, S. (1992). *Teaching English in the primary classroom*. New York: Longman.

Heaton, J. (1979). *An Audiovisual Method for ESL*.

Lojova, G. (2005). *Individualne osobitosti pri uceni sa cudzich jazykov*. Bratislava: Univerzita Komenskeho.

Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Hess, M. & Sklarew, S. (1994). Realia and American Culture. *WATESOL Journal*, Fall, 10-12.

Kristiansen, A., (2001). Animation and teaching: Enhancing subjects from the curriculum by using "The Simpsons" in high school English teaching. Retrieved May 1, 2009, from <http://www.snpp.com/other/papers/ak.paper.html>.

Nedomová, A. (2007). Teaching grammar to young learners. Unpublished master thesis, Masaryk University, Czech Republic. Retrieved on 28-March-2008, at URL: http://is.muni.cz/th/44537/pedf_b/bachelor_thesis.pdf.

Nunan, D. (1999). Second language teaching and learning. Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle.

Özer, Ö. (2004). Teaching English to Children, 69.

Özkan, H., & Arikan, A. (2010). To what extent does English language teacher education curriculum prepare prospective teachers for teaching young learners? Proceedings of the International Conference on New Trends in Education and their Implications, pp. 18-23, Antalya.

Pinter, A. (2006). Teaching young language learners. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ralston, K. (2013). Learning grammar in a suitable way: a look at how children with autism and SLi could potentially learn to identify the gender of Icelandic nouns. Retrieved from <http://skemman.is/en/item/view/1946/16363>.

Rivers, W. (1983). Speaking in Many Tongues. New York: Cambridge University Press, Third Edition.

Scott, W. A., & Ytreberg, L.H. (2001). Teaching English to Children (14th ed.). New York: Longman

Shin, J. K. (2006). Ten helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners. English Teaching Forum, 44 (2), 2-13.

Short, D. (1991). Integrating Language and Content Instruction: Strategies and Techniques. NCBE Program Information Guide Series, 7. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu/ncbepubs/pigs/pig7.html> [Accessed June 7, 1997].

Thornbury, S. (1999). How to teach Grammar. Longman.

United States Department of Education. (2008). Teaching children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Instructional strategies and practices, 1–29. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/adhd/adhd-teaching.html>.

Ur, P. (1996). A course in Language Teaching. Cambridge University Press.

Walz, J. (1986). Increasing Student Talk Time in the Foreign Language Classroom. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*. 42 (5), 952-967.

IJSER