

## **Why is Teaching Foreign Languages to Very Young learners Different?**

Sophie Ioannou-Georgiou

1. Children may not yet be able to carry out logical or abstract thinking i.e. cognitive abilities are not very advanced. Piaget claims that thinking that ‘resembles’ logical thinking might begin at year 7, whereas they are able to carry out logical operations from age eleven.
2. Children develop rapidly and change fast so teachers need to be sensitive and open to their needs and continually monitor these changing needs
3. Children learn holistically and are good at inferring meaning. In order to maximize this ability, there should be a lot of input offered to the children. We should offer opportunities for natural language and interaction. They need to experience language.
4. Children have not fully developed their mother tongue abilities so they may not be developmentally ready for certain aspects of the foreign language either (e.g. third person –s). They are, however, experts at ‘making a little language go a long way’ so can communicate a range of meanings and in a variety of situations, despite their little language.
5. Children rely on context to infer meaning. Familiarity of context is important. They do not need to understand every word but use intonation, gestures, facial expressions and context. In addition, research shows that children who know a topic well show increased memory capacities for knowledge associated with that area. It also helps if they personalize what they learn. Young children are very much concerned about themselves.
6. They are too young to see any practical relevance to the learning of English. Their motivation, therefore, can only be intrinsic. They learn English because they like their lessons, their teacher, etc. Motivation at this age is easy to gain but also easy to lose. Teachers must introduce various motivational techniques to maintain the children’s motivation.
7. Young learners’ do not have well developed literacy skills in their first language. They are still learning how to read and write. The foreign language should, therefore, primarily focus on listening and speaking.
8. Children need a lot of recycling of the language learned. The same language should be used again and again in various contexts and using various skills.
9. Younger children have shorter attention spans than older children. They might not be able to keep focused for a long period. Nevertheless, they can achieve longer attention spans when they are dealing with something they really enjoy.
10. Children have a need for physical activity. They find it difficult to immobilize their body for a long time. It seems unnatural to them and makes the activity which is related to their immobility tedious and tiring. Employing physical activities or allowing them to move about or alternate sitting and standing makes things more bearable for them.