

# Young Second-Language Learners: Let's Keep Their Attention

by Emilio G. Cortez

It is often difficult to deal effectively with the restlessness of young pupils in the elementary-school second-language class. Consequently, elementary-school E.S.L. teachers must present English in varied and interesting ways. In keeping with the need to utilize a variety of teaching strategies to sustain the interest of young second-language learners, several suggestions will be proposed.

The ways in which difficult English sounds, sentences, or expressions are introduced often set the tone for subsequent learning. One method that has proven effective has been to urge students to close their eyes as they listen carefully to the teacher's oral model. This "eyes-closed" technique can be introduced at any time throughout the oral practice phase and holds the interest of many pupils because of its gamelike quality.

Another approach that sustains pupils' interest is backward build-up. Backward build-up is a teaching technique that helps students to remember lengthy sentences or phrases. This technique usually entails dividing a sentence into simple speech units and orally presenting the last unit first and proceeding backwards. Consider the following example:

*Elaine Melvin moved to Yeadon from Atlanta in January.*

If after several repetitions, the teacher deems it appropriate to resort to backward build-up then the sentence above could be presented orally as follows:

*from Atlanta in January, Elaine Melvin moved to Yeadon.*

Since backward build-up involves the seemingly playful manipulations of words and phrases, many children find this activity appealing. Thus, it is suggested that backward build-up be used with short sentences as well as long ones so as to provide an added dimension to oral practice. (Backward build-up can also be used to help

students overcome pronunciation difficulties; even a single word can be divided into syllables and presented accordingly.)

When leading students in choral repetition drills, E.S.L. teachers are urged to speak naturally, with proper rhythm and intonation, in addition to discouraging pupils from chanting their responses. To dissuade chanted responses and to provide more diversification in choral drills the teacher can vary the modulation of the oral cue. As the teacher's volume gets lower, students are compelled to listen more intently. Furthermore, many children enjoy mimicking the teacher's modulation as it oscillates from a normal volume to a whisper.

The pedagogic dialogue has been lauded overwhelmingly as an effective teaching tool.

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Nevertheless, many commercially-prepared dialogues are insipid and lack relevance for many young pupils.

To create relevant dialogues, a modified community language learning technique can be utilized. This approach works best in a small-group setting in which all the students speak the same first language.

Pupils are seated in a circle. Each student gets one turn either asking or responding to a question or comment posed by a peer. For example, one pupil asks

another pupil a question in his/her native language. The teacher translates the question into English and repeats it several times so that the child will feel comfortable repeating the question in English. After the child can satisfactorily repeat the teacher's English model, the child's question is tape recorded. The child who was asked the question responds in his/her native language, the teacher translates it into English, and so on. Only the pupils' English utterances are recorded. After recording both the questions and their responses, the dialogue can be played and transcribed on the chalkboard for individual and/or choral reading practice. This method has the advantage of producing immediately relevant dialogues, in addition to encouraging self-expression, and stressing the relationship of speech to writing.

In summary, the following suggestions

have been presented:

1. The "eyes-closed" technique when orally introducing and/or reinforcing novel sounds, sentences, or phrases.
2. The occasional use of backward build-up for short sentences as well as for words that cause pronunciation difficulties.
3. The variation of voice modulation by the teacher during choral repetition drills.
4. The creation of relevant pedagogic dialogues through the use of a modified community language learning approach.

When appropriately implemented, these suggestions can be very effective for motivating and sustaining the interest of the young second language learner.