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EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES TO UNDERSTAND INSTRUCTIONS BY PRIMARY SCHOOL ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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Abstract. *This study described the implementation of selected techniques of giving instructions to primary school English language learners by the trainee teacher during the Observed Teaching, which were purported to enhance their understanding of instructions and the effect it produced on learners' achievement in the English language. It showed a significant correlation between understanding instructions by young learners and their progress in English. It is also focused on the trainee teacher's ability to reflect on ways of giving instructions to young learners and points out to the most challenging aspects from the perspective of the trainee teacher and suggests some recommendations drawn from the experience.*

Key words: *techniques of giving instructions, primary school English language learners, planning instructions, non-verbal aids of instruction giving, reflective teaching*

Introduction.

In the field of teaching English to young learners the issue of giving instructions plays an important part. There are cases where primary school English language learners achieve less not because the learning material is too difficult to them, but because they simply do not understand what to do in this or that activity, or at this or that stage of the lesson or test. That, in its turn, raises the question about the importance of giving instructions by the teachers effectively, so that teaching and learning will not be doomed to failure. Issues concerning giving instructions in English language learning have been widely discussed. Thay are closely connected to classroom management, interrelation between teacher's and learner's talking time and planning teaching.

This research is a collaborative classroom action research which main purpose was to get to know how understanding instructions by primary school English language learners effect their achievement in the English language. The group of primary learners under consideration is a monolingual class of 24 students of grade 4, who had great expectations and rather high motivation towards the English language learning. They were eight- and nine-year-olds. They needed lots of attention, play, and engagement.

Main text.

There are some obvious differences between teaching a foreign language to children as opposed to teaching adults or adolescents. Cameron points out that "children are often more enthusiastic and lively as learners. They want to please the teacher rather than their peer group" and they "seem less embarrassed than adults at talking in a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native-like accent" [1, p. 1]. On the other hand, "they lose interest more quickly and

are less able to keep themselves motivated on task they find difficult" [1, p. 1]. The peculiarities of linguistic, psychological and social development of young learners require adjustment of the way English teachers think about the classroom activities they use, the language they teach, and the language they use to give instructions. So, knowledge about children's learning, their learning needs is seen as central to effective teaching.

Giving instructions to learners is not an easy task because the teachers should be masters of the know-how to do it. Harmer states that even "the best activity in the world is a waste of time if the students do not understand what they are supposed to do" [4, p. 4]. The difficulties here arouse not due to some personal characteristics of learners, such as being lazy or inattentive, but because the instructions are not effective. The idea is also supported by Scrivener who asserts that "an essentially simple activity can become impossible, not because the students could not do it, but because they did not understand what to do" [7, p. 90].

When it comes to giving instructions, a great importance is attached to planning, that is how to instruct learners what to do. Ur underlines the necessity for teachers to think of the way they give instructions, put them down ahead, use appropriate wording pointing out that "experience shows that teachers' explanations are often not as clear to their students as they are to themselves" [11, p. 16]. Scrivener recognizes importance of instruction planning stating that unplanned instruction sounds "like a joke" as teachers "are often unaware that they are talking in this way" and that is why "the essential information about what to do is embedded in confusing and unnecessary babble" [7, p. 90]. Therefore, unplanned instruction in EFL classrooms would hinder students' understanding. As soon as the teacher becomes aware of the significance of analyzing the "instructions beforehand so as to include only the essential information in simple, clear language and sequence it in a sensible order", misunderstanding disappears [7, p. 90].

Harmer suggests general rules for giving "logical" instructions making teachers ask themselves the following questions: "What is the important information I am trying to convey?", "What must the students know if they are to complete this activity successfully?", "Which information do they need first?", "Which should come next?" [4, p. 4]. So, the key to success in teaching lies in designing the lesson with planning instructions at each stage or step in advance.

The aim of this study is to investigate the effect of instruction giving techniques produced on primary school English language learners' achievement in the language classroom. The research questions that this research aims to investigate are:

1. What do primary learners say about the way they are given instructions?

2. How primary school English language learners' understanding of instructions influence their progress in learning English?

3. What can I do as a trainee teacher to enhance primary learners' understanding of instructions given to them in the language classroom?

The hypothesis was put forward, that implementation of set procedures of giving instructions based on persistent and continuous use of level appropriate instruction-giving techniques to the 4th grade learners would enhance their understanding of them and ultimately improve their progress in the English language learning.

The data collection was carried out, including, survey, pre- and post- tests, observations, and self-monitoring. To learn what learners say about the way they are given instruction at English lessons the survey was designed which contained eight statements: 1) I understand what the teacher asks me to do; 2) I remember what the teacher asks me to do; 3)The teacher looks at the class when she tells what to do; 4) The teacher sets the tasks quietly; 5)The teacher uses pictures/ realia while telling the class what to do; 6) The teacher uses gestures/ facial expression while telling the class what to do; 7) The teacher gives examples of how to do exercises; 8) I know what to do in the test tasks. They filled the survey in two times: before and after intervention. It also purported to encourage learners to think about how they learn, in addition to what they learn therefore helping them to become more effective and independent learners.

The participants also took pre- and post-tests which contained similar tasks but differed in the linguistic content which included vocabulary and grammar currently learnt by them and consisted of matching tasks, gap filling, multiple choice questions and true-false statements. To get primary learners' achievement in language learning, their test scores were collected and counted. To find out the average score, the total of primary learners' scores was divided with the total number of the learners. The average score was then classified into score indicators: Very Good (82-100%) – Good (75-81%) – Fair (60-74%) – Bad (0-59%).

Observation of English lessons at primary school confirmed that teachers refer to the Ukrainian language (L1) while giving instructions, in particular. They may say one sentence and then translate it into the mother tongue or ask learners to translate it. Halliwell warns against doing it even with the best of motives as it gives the sense to young learners they are expected "to understand every little bit they hear" [3, p. 12]. Instead, she mentions that it is important to deal with whole messages giving learners a chance to guess the bits they do not understand. Therefore, special attention was given to reduce to the minimum or even eliminate using L1 in the instruction-giving process during the intervention.

To some learners, especially young ones, it appears to be extremely important to be exposed to the instruction not for once. According to Ur, "a repetition or paraphrase of the necessary information may make all the difference: learners' attention wanders occasionally, and it is important to give them more than one chance to understand what they have to do" [11, p. 17]. But there is a warning here: while repeating the instruction for the second time, it is vital to represent it "in a different mode: for example, say it and also write it up on the board" [11, p. 17].

Apart from giving instructions orally, the process can be supported non-verbally by pictures, realia, gestures, facial expressions, voice and key words on the board. Such support is advantageous to both, learners and teachers. Mohan and Phil [5, p. 13] point out the following benefits of these supports: adding interest and involvement, making learning permanent, reducing verbalism, developing greater understanding, stimulating self-activity, bringing the world into the classroom. Patel and Jain claim, that well-chosen teaching aids supplement oral teaching, prevent indiscipline and monotony, save time and energy, provide direct experience [6, pp. 66-67].

Mime and gestures, as non-verbal supporters, play an essential role in teaching as they reduce teacher talking time (TTT) and increase student talking time (STT). Teacher talk being one of the main resources in the language classroom, should be kept to the minimum as much as possible. Ur points out that students "have only a limited attention span; they cannot listen to you for very long at maximum concentration" and that is why "teachers should talk less and when it comes to giving instructions to a certain task, their language should be short and clear enough to be understood, otherwise students would not follow them" [11, p. 17]. Scrivener advises teachers to use a set of gestures and facial expressions so as not to repeat "basic instructions" and meanwhile give more chances to students to talk [7, p. 95]. Syathroh resumes that "Total Physical Response (TPR) is still assumed to be the most effective way to teach English to young learners" [9]. With that in mind, the choice of making an extensive use of non-verbal aids along with oral instructions to enhance learners understanding of them during the intervention was made.

The list of verbs "Classroom language" needed to give instructions to do activities as well as to organize learners to perform different tasks during English lessons was compiled and the word cards were designed. A card contained a picture illustrating the action and the removable notice with a written form of the verb. From 6 to 8 cards with verbs were introduced at every lesson. Some of the verbs were known to learners, but such cards still were used to reinforce the verbs and agree on the gestures, mimics, or facial expressions they could be accompanied by. So, repeating instruction in a different mode especially using visual support, in this case a picture, a notice or a gesture etc., were called to reinforce its understanding and remembering. Learners played a card game to remember the verbs, their meaning, pronunciation and spelling at every lesson conducted. The cards were changed adding new ones and putting aside those, that learners had already learnt.

In planning teaching special focus was made on the ways how to give instructions basically relying on the techniques of giving instructions suggested by Scrivener [8, p. 128-131]. To kept reflecting on giving instructions in- and on-action, the "Self-Monitoring Sheet" was used. It helped to notice any oversights and to focus on this or that aspect of giving instructions, which initially caused the greater difficulty to the trainee teacher.

To answer the 1st research question *'What do primary learners say about the way they are given instructions?'* the participants responded to statements of the survey before and after the intervention. The 10 items asked participants to respond in a 3-point Likert-scale format. The response continuum was: 3 = Always, 2 = Sometimes, 1 = Never. For each participant, score was derived by adding his or her ratings of the 8 items. The following scoring rubric of three levels of primary school learners' understanding instructions was used: 3 – 7 points = Low Level; 8 – 15 points = Medium Level; 16 – 24 points = High Level. Here are the key points showing that before Intervention 6 learners (25%) understood instructions on high level, 10 learners (42%) demonstrated medium level of understanding, and 8 learners (33%) showed low level. After Intervention 13 learners (54%) developed high level of instruction understanding, 9 learners (38%) acquired understanding on medium level, and 2 learners (8%) remained on low level. This suggests the intervention was

effective in improving comprehension.

To answer the 2nd research question *'How primary school English language learners' understanding of instructions influence their progress in learning English?'* the participants took two tests: before intervention (pre-test) and after it (post-test). The 'Pre-Test' results represented by 73.8 are categorized as fair in score indicator. The 'Post-test' results by 79.8 are categorized as good in score indicator. This shows a positive change in primary learners' performance after an educational intervention demonstrating the learners' progress.

To answer the 3rd research question '*What can I do as a trainee teacher to enhance primary learners' understanding of instructions given to them in the language classroom?*' 'Self-Monitoring Sheet' (adapted from [12]) was filled in after conducting each lesson out of 8 in total. It helped to register he dynamics of the frequency with which the trainee teacher focused on a certain aspect of giving instructions. The frequency is measured from 0 to 100, where 0-25% denotes 'Never/Seldom', 26-50% – 'Occasionally', 51-75% – 'Frequently', and 76-100% – 'Most/ All the Time'. It allowed to notice varying patterns and intersect at different points, indicating the changing frequency of each monitoring aspect during the instruction-giving process, and to analyze how certain aspects are prioritized over others in instructional methods.

Summary and conclusions.

The comparative analysis of the findings revealed the change in all three levels of understanding instructions by the participants: high level increased by 29%, medium level decreased by 4%, and low level declined by 25%. Data obtained from this survey give evidence of improving comprehension of instructions by primary English learners.

It is worth pointing to statement (4) from the survey about teachers giving instructions in a quiet voice. Varying the voice, as the most important teachers' instrument serves different functions in giving instructions. Harmer gives examples of teachers, who raise their voices to stop students chatting or at least to be heard by them, instead he recommends, that "speaking quietly is often just as effective a way of getting the students' attention since, when they realize that you are talking, they will want to stop and listen in case you are saying something important or interesting" [4, p.17]. Considering this, a point of not raising the voice to give instructions was made. The observation showed that this practice worked well, and learners listened even more attentively just to catch every bit of the instruction.

Primary learners also appreciated the possibility to get examples of what they are required to perform (statement 7). This constitutes another important aspect of giving instructions: to give an example of what and how learners should do an activity rather than telling only. Scrivener advises teachers to "demonstrate rather than explain whenever possible" [7, p. 91]. Ur calls this situation "actual demonstration"; that is, the teacher models the activity either with one of the learners or with the whole class [11]. El Kemma summarizes four forms of modeling. A teacher may ask students to role-play an activity to make sure that instructions are well understood. Teachers can also ask their students "to repeat back the instructions" without choosing "the strongest person in the group to do this" as high achievers

normally get the instructions from the first time contrary to low achievers. Moreover, "asking two students to demonstrate the activity in front of the class" is another option. Last but not least, a teacher may not give instructions to students at all and let them look at the activity and see what they have to do. Such a technique may be used while dealing with activities students are familiar with and not new ones. By and large, it has become evident that demonstrating is an effective option for delivering instructions; it is like magic as students see things in action rather than get bombarded with words [2, p.77]. Asking learners to guess what they are supposed to do in the activity works with more profound students and therefore is not recommended at early stages of mastering English.

The comparison of the results of primary learners' achievement on pre- and post-tests shows that progress has been made in language learning. The average score on the pre-test raised by 6.0: from 73.8 which represented fair indicator to 79.8 on post-test which corresponds to a good one. Though the progress is not outstanding, and the other factors might also have influenced the test results, but still, the implementation of the suggested techniques tested by the experiment may provide even higher results within a longer period.

During the study a lot of time was dedicated to the reflection about the ways the trainee teacher gave instructions to the participants. Reflective teaching means looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you do it, and thinking about if it works – a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. "By collecting information about what goes on in our classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, we identify and explore our own practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvements in our teaching" [10]. Self-Monitoring Sheet helped the trainee teacher to focus on a certain aspect of giving instructions. Further, the particularly challenging aspects to the trainee teacher are pointed out. For example, the question (5) about avoiding 'stating commands as questions or requests that students have the right to refuse'. The language of classroom instructions used to direct learners to do or not to do something, to perform or not to perform an act, to start or to end an activity etc. is often referred to as directive, "a speech act that has the function of getting the listener to do something, such as a suggestion, a request, or a command". It's helpful to follow Wright's advice to deliver brief commands as learners find them "easy to understand and hard to misinterpret" in "establishing classroom control" [12, p. 12]. He also states, that "effective commands are stated as directives rather than questions" admitting the use of request forms in case the situation demands from the student to either accept or decline", that is to make choice instead of following instruction directly. He warns teachers of long explanations after giving a command since students "diminish the force of the directive"; if an explanation is a must, it should be brief and most importantly delivered before the command, not after it. He also recommends delivering a command which refers to "one task or objective at a time". He argues that "when a command contains multi-step directions, students can mishear, misinterpret, or forget key steps. A student who appears to be noncompliant may simply be confused about which step in a multi-step directive to do first!" [12, p. 12].

Monitoring and reflecting on this aspect helped the trainee teacher to move through all frequencies of attending to using commands instead of requests, from 'Never/Seldom', through 'Occasionally' and 'Frequently', and up to 'Most/ All the Time'. Influenced by his university learning experience where instructions are often given as questions or requests required special effort to avoid overlooking it.

Just on the same or very much alike grounds, attending to avoid confusing the student with long verbalizations, justifications, or explanations of why the command is given (question 6) required trainee teacher's full concentration. Scrivener advises teachers to "use short sentences – one sentence for each key piece of information' [7, p. 90]. When students receive long and unplanned instructions, they get lost. So, learners would get involved in the activity without difficulty as long as the language they have received is brief and simple. In literature this approach is shaped as "KISS" principle meaning "keep instructions short and simple". To a trainee teacher it is important to focus on using 'grammar and vocabulary that is at or below the learners' current level' [9]. Self-monitoring and reflecting demonstrated moving successfully through 'Occasionally' and 'Frequently', and up to 'Most/ All the Time' frequency of keeping to this technique be the trainee teacher.

The investigations into this area seem likely to confirm the hypothesis that implementation of set procedures of giving instructions based on persistent and continuous use of level appropriate instruction-giving techniques to the 4th grade learners enhance their understanding of them and improve their progress in the English language learning.

Conducting this research enables to develop recommendations for trainee teachers, novice English teachers and anybody concerned with giving instructions to primary school English language learners, who are low-level students, effectively: carefully plan your instructions; keep to the order of giving instructions – deviations should be justified (by the activity itself, materials used, etc.); introduce learners to classroom language steadily; give instructions in a quiet voice; use non-verbal aids to repeat/ rephrase instructions; use simple, precise commands with the language, appropriate to learners' level. Follow "KISS" principle "keep instructions short and simple"; study and make use of techniques of giving instructions; reflect on your ways of giving instructions continuously.

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