



► BaharDanesh Language Center: Children's Island

Children's Island was my first educational initiative. It has been a valuable experience in the field of ESL and sustainability education. In this section, a brief description of Children's Island is presented in two parts: The first part discusses the inspiration behind the idea and the second elaborates on the educational approach. The underlined gives extra information by sample photos on my personal website.

Part One: The Inspiration

The idea behind the establishment of BaharDanesh Language Center (BaharDanesh means Spring of Knowledge in Farsi) originated from university seminars I have conducted. The need for these seminars was tangible because I had observed a common problem among Iranian university students, namely low English proficiency. The typical Iranian student begins learning English in elementary school and continues attending English classes through university and beyond. However, the result is by no means acceptable, since he/she is unable to engage in a simple English conversation. Having considered the importance of the English in business communication, I decided to conduct seminars on ESL topics. By posing the following two questions, the seminars take a different look at the issue of low English proficiency among students:

- a) Why do Iranian students have a low English proficiency?
- b) What new methods can be proposed for learning English?

As for the first question, it can be stated that the English teaching method prescribed by the Iranian Ministry of Education is the outdated and is the traditional Grammar-Translation Method (GTM) which overemphasizes vocabulary and reading comprehension. Consequently, the application of novel teaching methods, such as PPP, TPR, and CLT, has been overlooked; this approach accounts for the low English proficiency and a lack of interest in learning English. The seminar's most important message, however, is presented by posing its second question: 'What new methods can be proposed for learning English?'

The seminar introduces the 'Immersive Language Learning' as one of the best approaches to ESL learning. Having recognized the reason for low English proficiency in universities, I decided to teach young learners and focus on building a foundation of learning English at early ages. This experience became the inspiration behind the establishment of Children's Island in 2016.

Considering the Children's Island's Edutainment approach and the fact that the world of children and their learning style are greatly different from those of an adult, I focused on preparing a child-friendly setting which is both educational and entertaining.

Part Two: The Education System

Considering the fact that working with children entails a great deal of patience, perseverance, and flexibility, all the ESL teachers selected must have extensive background in early childhood education. This skill better enables them to build emotional ties and promote interaction with children in the classrooms. In addition, to improve the performance of the school, regular monthly teacher meetings are held to share and discuss the latest educational methodologies, exchange ideas, and choose the top teacher of the month. According to the project's learning agenda, this center incorporates entertaining and educational content while employing a wide range of teaching aids, such as VR games, videos, songs, flash cards, and arts and crafts projects. This approach is taken in order to lower TTT (Teacher Talking Time), increase STT (Student Talking Time), and finally create a student-centered learning atmosphere with an emphasis on speaking skills. Consequently, learners are more engaged and amused during the learning experience.

The excitement, interest, energy, and enthusiasm of the students are further raised by taking advantage of the Children's Island's campus and playgrounds. This outside learning enables students to improve their speaking skills by practicing situational English. For example, assigning children to different job titles helps them to become more familiar with commonly used English terms of different careers. Therefore, by planning seasonal field trips, different workplaces, such as hospitals, fire departments, amusement parks, historical sites, music studios, and so on, are visited each semester. Finally, events such as end-of-term festivals allow the parents to directly monitor the progress of their children.

 <http://azghandi.net/Languagecenter.html>

