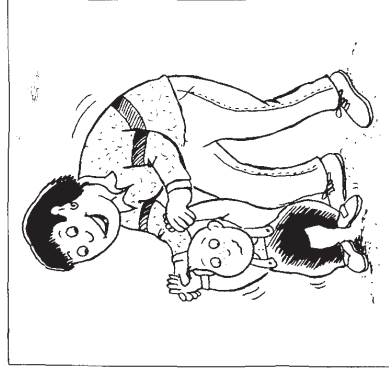


Chapter 6 **Do you need a hand?**
Supporting children's language learning

The right help
now ... assists
independence
later.

The illustration shows a woman helping a child to walk. Through her support, he is learning to stand upright, to walk and gain strength in his legs. Eventually as the child gains strength in his muscles and develops confidence, he will not need any support. In the same way, children need support for language learning, ie assistance to carry out learning activities that they would not yet be able to do unaided. Providing support helps children to gain the knowledge, ability and confidence to eventually function more independently. It is also one of the ways in which we maintain the conditions which aid language learning. In this chapter, we will consider:

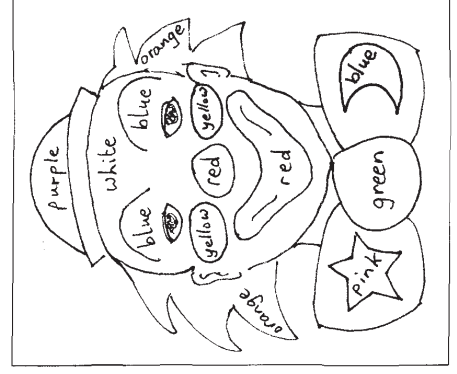


- 1 Support and how to provide it
- 2 Ways of supporting children's language learning
- 3 How to assess the support needed
- 4 How to adjust and reduce support gradually
- 5 Teachers' questions about providing appropriate support for young learners

The aim of this chapter is to raise your awareness about the importance of providing suitable types of support for language learning and to encourage you to examine the nature of the support you provide and consider whether it is helpful for learners.

1 **Support and how to provide it**

Consider the *Read and colour* activity opposite (used by a Colombian teacher with her six to seven-year-old pupils in their first year of learning English). How would you help children to carry out this activity successfully? They need help (support) to enable them to do the activity. Without help, some children might not be able to do the activity. The support you provide would depend on the children's current level of English and their familiarity with the language and with the activity. There are some suggestions on the next page. Which of these would be relevant for your learners?



Suggested procedure

- Find out what pupils know about clowns in order to activate their knowledge about the topic, eg *Have you seen clowns? Where? What did they look like?*
- Relate the topic to their own experience, eg *Have you been to a circus?*
- Discuss the picture and check if pupils are familiar with the different parts of the face. Revise the colour words, eg *pink, orange*.
- Give a purpose for doing the activity, eg *Let's make nice pictures for our circus display*.
- Check if pupils can read and understand the colour labels on the drawing.
- Demonstrate how to do the activity with their help, eg *Look at the picture. What colour shall I put on the nose?*
- Put up a colour chart with word labels on the wall for children to consult in case they can't read a particular word label.

If children are familiar with the colour labels, there might be no need to provide a colour chart on the wall. If this type of colouring activity is familiar, it might not need a demonstration, just verbal instructions and a check that children know what to do. So the support we give is linked to what we know children can and can't do. Support is a kind of graded help which enables pupils to carry out an activity successfully by themselves. In the process they learn the procedures and skills they need to gain greater control over and awareness of their underlying language system. They may also gradually develop their capacity to regulate their own learning.

2 Ways of supporting children's language learning

Here is an actual example of a teacher providing support for her learners in the classroom. Let's consider how it assists language learning.

Aishah, a Malaysian teacher, is teaching a class in their second year of learning English (eight to nine-year-olds). Her unit of teaching is based on the topic of wild animals. Her overall aim in the lesson is to get children to understand and practise a dialogue about animals. This contains some of the key structures and vocabulary to be practised in her teaching unit.

The dialogue which she wants the pupils to practise is:

Yani What animal is that?
 Yapin Oh, it's an elephant.
 Yani An elephant. Wow it's so big!
 Is an elephant a wild animal?
 Yapin Yes, it is.
 Yani Where does it live?
 Yapin In the jungle.
 Yani How about its food?
 Yapin It eats leaves and bark and fruit and vegetables.

Task 1 Support for language learning

Read the lesson transcript and, as you read, do the following:

- Notice each piece of support which the teacher offers pupils.
- Mark on the transcript whether the degree or quantity of support was just right, too much or insufficient.

1	T	Where can you find animals?	
	Pps	Zoo.	
	T	OK. Have you been to the zoo before?	
	Pps	Yes.	
5	T	What kinds of animals can you find in a zoo? Yes, Hazidah?	
	P	Tiger.	
	T	Tiger – good.	
	P	Monkey.	
	T	Monkey. Yes. Rudi?	
10	P	Elephant.	
	T	Elephant.	
	P	Crocodile.	
	T	OK, crocodile. That's good. You've been to the zoo. Last week your friend Yapin (<i>T holds up picture of a boy</i>) and .. this is Yani (<i>holds up picture of a girl</i>) They went to the ...?	
15	Pps	... zoo.	
	T	<i>Yani never been to the zoo before ... uh she's never been there, (makes shaking gestures with hands to indicate 'never before')</i> so Yapin took her along the ... around and round the ... (<i>shows action of walking around holding pictures in her hand</i>)	
20	Pps	... zoo. (<i>pupils complete the sentence</i>)	
	T	While they were walking, suddenly Yani saw a big ... (<i>makes gesture with two hands to show how large</i>)	
	P	... elephant.	
25	T	Yes, a big elephant. I think she didn't know what is ... was the animal (<i>points to Yani's picture</i>) animal.	
	Pps	Animal. (<i>repeating teacher's last word</i>)	
	T	Animal ... so big. OK. (<i>holds up a picture of a large elephant</i>)	
	P	Wow! (<i>expresses wonder at the picture</i>)	
30	T	(<i>places pictures of Yapin and Yani on board. Then a few minutes later ...</i>)	
	T	So when Yani saw the elephant she was so surprised. (<i>makes a gesture of surprise</i>) What is she so surprised at? What do you think Yani would ask Yapin?	
	P	What is the animal, Yapin?	
35	T	What animal is that, Yapin? (<i>holds up a sentence card</i>) Can you read the sentence?	
	Pps	What animal is that Yapin? (<i>pupils chorus after teacher</i>)	
	T	What animal is that? (<i>sticks sentence on the blackboard</i>)	
	P	that Yapin (<i>inaudible</i>)	
40	T	OK, so Yapin said ... (<i>holds up a sentence card</i>)	
	Pps	Oh, it is an elephant. (<i>pupils read in chorus</i>)	
	T	Yes, it is an elephant. (<i>sticks up the sentence on the board</i>)	
	P	It is a big elephant.	
	T	Then Yani wants to know more and more about the ...?	
45	Pps	... elephant.	
	T	.. elephant.	
	P	What ...? (<i>pupil begins to make up a question</i>)	
	T	So she asked Yapin, her brother ... (<i>shows sentence card</i>)	
	Pps	Where does it live? (<i>pupils read aloud</i>)	
50	T	Where does it live?	
	P	It lives from ... in jungle.	
	T	Where do you think the elephant lives?	
	Pps	Elephant live in jungle.	
	T	Yes, in the ...?	
	Pps	.. jungle.	

Commentary ■ ■ ■

- The teacher provides support for the pupils in the *language* she uses. She adjusts her language to suit the level of the pupils, as parents do. She ...
- repeats pupils' answers, (line 25 *Yes, a big elephant.*) which confirms the answer and provides reinforcement.
 - rephrases answers, (line 53 *Yes, in the ...?* where she adds the article which pupils have omitted).
 - prompts through a rise in her intonation (line 43 *Then Yami wants to know more about the ...?*).
 - frames sentences (line 22, *While they were walking, suddenly Yami saw a big ...*) and encourages pupils to finish them. This keeps pupils involved and provides support for less able pupils who may not be able to frame complete sentences.
 - uses gestures and actions to support and show meanings (lines 22–23 *makes gesture with zoo hands to show how large*).

She also provides support through the *techniques and resources* she uses. She ...

- uses pictures of the characters involved to help to make the meaning clear
- activates background knowledge about the topic so that pupils can link new knowledge to what they already know. The knowledge they already have about zoos and animals enables them to anticipate what is to come. Therefore they are ready to receive the new information
- responds positively to pupils' contributions (line 13 *OK, crocodile. That's good.*).
- creates a meaningful purpose for using language. (She draws on a familiar context of a visit to a zoo and creates a situation where a young sister has not seen an elephant before.) The reason for asking the questions, therefore, makes sense to the pupils
- encourages pupils to predict (line 32 *What do you think Yami would ask Yapin?*) This allows them to draw on their background knowledge. It gets them more actively involved in thinking about the topic and brings in some of the vocabulary needed.
- confirms answers so pupils know if they were right or wrong (line 25 *Yes, a big elephant.*) which provides feedback to them
- provides the written forms of the questions and answers as a visual reinforcement of what has been said. In some cases, it rephrases pupils' attempts. (line 33 *What is the animal, Yapin?* is rephrased as line 34 *What animal is that, Yapin?*)

The teacher gives further support by choosing contexts which.

- are familiar to the pupils, eg a visit to a zoo
 - provide clues to the meaning of the language
 - begin from the concrete, physical, 'here and now' and move to the more abstract, eg from a dialogue acted out orally with visuals to a written dialogue on the board.
- On the whole, the support seems to be quite well matched to the level of the class. For example, as pupils are already familiar with zoos and the names of a large number of wild animals, the teacher does not need to bring in pictures of a zoo and all the animals. However the picture of the two children and the elephant are helpful as they create a specific context for the discussion and building up of the dialogue. The teacher's gestures help to make the meaning clear and also arouse interest in the pupils. The pupils seem to be in touch with what is going on and eager to respond. So the lesson seems pitched at the right level
- There are just a few points where the support seems too much for pupils. Pupils seem eager to guess the questions which Yami asked Yapin and readily volunteer information. This suggests that they are already familiar with some of the material and capable of contributing more than they are allowed to. Perhaps the teacher could allow more

opportunity for pupils to predict or suggest the questions and answers. She does not always respond to and build on pupils' suggestions. For example, one pupil volunteers a question in line 33, *What is the animal, Yapin?* but the teacher for some reason ignores this suggestion. Instead she provides her own question, which is almost identical to the pupil's, without acknowledging and praising his attempt. In line 50, a pupil volunteers the answer *It lives from in jungle*. This is almost identical to what the teacher has on her card, but she fails to acknowledge the pupil's answer. She could build on answers like this and in so doing also provide feedback on any language errors the children make, so enabling them to revise hypotheses about the language. ■

We can summarize the different types of support which teachers can use to help their pupils as three main types

Language

This refers to all the things the teacher does through speech or gesture which provide support for children in carrying out a learning activity

- using language at children's level, eg choosing words and structures they will be able to understand, such as *put the book on the table* rather than *place the book on the table*
- adjusting one's language to help children understand, eg repeating, rephrasing, extending what a child says
- adjusting one's speed and volume, using pausing to give children time to think
- using gestures, actions, eg spreading your arms wide to show that something is big, a nod of the head for 'yes', facial expressions, making noises, eg noise of a hen 'cluck cluck', noise of a bus 'brm, brm', to help understanding

Techniques/Resources

This refers to all the techniques and resources the teacher uses to help pupils to do the activities

- moving from known to new, from concrete to abstract, eg showing a toy bus and later talking about *a bus* using only words
- focusing on things, actions, events which children can see, eg *Look at these puppets you made. What colour are they?* *Do they have sad or happy faces?*
- using practical 'hands-on' activities in which language is supported by action, eg action games, making paper animals
- giving children a clear and understandable purpose for doing activities, eg *Let's find out what happens at the end of the story*
- revising vocabulary or language needed for activities, eg colour words for the clown activity
- providing language prompts or models to help pupils carry out the activity, eg a 'fill in the gap' activity with words or phrases to choose from, flash cards, wall charts containing the words needed
- giving clear feedback on pupils' responses and on learning activities
- using visual support to help pupils understand a story or dialogue, eg pictures, objects
- providing a clear situation or context for language activities, which is familiar to children, eg a story, a visit to a park
- providing opportunities to learn through a variety of senses, eg hearing, seeing, touching, feeling, smelling, moving
- demonstrating and modelling for children how to do an activity
- creating activities which are interesting to children, eg games, drama, making things and personalizing activities so they relate to children's own experiences

Children themselves

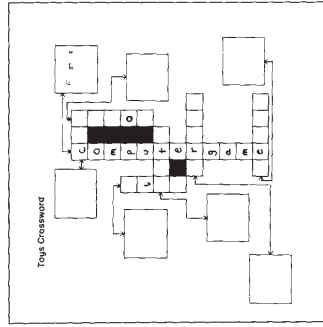
The support that children provide for each other is so obvious that we often forget to acknowledge it. Children can get support by working with other children

- learning by watching other children (as models)
- learning by listening to and getting help from other children (as tutors)
- learning by practising with other children (as partners)

3 How to assess the support needed

When selecting learning activities, we need to decide what type of support is needed by pupils to carry out an activity. Some initial whole-class preparation may be sufficient for most pupils, but not for all. Others may need support in actually doing the activity

Look at the *Toys* crossword below taken from *Stepping Stones Book 1*. This activity revises some of the vocabulary introduced earlier in the unit. Some pupils might find it very difficult and need more support than is provided within the activity



Task 2 How much support to give?

- How would you prepare the whole class for doing the activity?
- What support is already provided by the activity?
- What support would you provide for weaker pupils while they were doing the activity?
- After doing the activity, identify how you assessed the support needed

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Here are some suggestions on how to prepare the whole class. They will not be appropriate for all situations because the actual decisions teachers take will depend on the needs of their own learners. Pupils using *Stepping Stones* will already have done some crosswords earlier in the book. This one is slightly more challenging because it does not provide many contextual clues. They have to rely on their memory of the toys they have learned

- Give pupils a clear purpose for doing the activity, eg *Let's see if we can do this puzzle. We have to guess what the mystery words are*
- Put an example of this type of crossword on the blackboard, making sure it is not identical to the one in the book
- Ask pupils if they know what they have to do
- Fill in one or two examples with their help on the board. Show how they need to make sure the number of letters fits the spaces provided
- Encourage them to think about where they can get help with spelling the names of toys (In *Stepping Stones* the complete survey form on the adjoining page of the activity book gives a list of all toys needed to fill the crossword)

The activity itself provides support by giving at least one letter for each word. The blank boxes for drawing pictures of the words gives pupils a way of checking that they have found the right words. An example is provided for them

Weaker pupils can be given picture cues to go with the crossword puzzle. The visual support will help to remind them of the toys. You could also show them the completed

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survey list so they can find the spelling for the names of the toys. In addition, you could get pupils to work in pairs so that they get support from a partner

To assess what support is required, the following checklist may be helpful, though you will always need to be able to respond flexibly in each case

- Has the child done a similar activity before?
- How personalized is the activity, ie does it involve children's own ideas or material?
- Which skills/language does the child already possess relevant for doing the activity?
- Which new skills/language/procedures are required for doing this activity?
- How much contextual support is built into the activity itself?
- Can the child work independently?

The day-to-day aim of support is to enable children to achieve some success at their own level so that they make visible progress and are, therefore, motivated to continue learning. As we saw in Chapters 2 and 4, if children feel some sense of achievement, this helps to build self-esteem and promotes positive attitudes to language learning

4 How to adjust and reduce support gradually

It is important to gradually reduce or adjust support as children become familiar with the procedures and skills required for doing a task. For example, in using TPR (total physical response) activities involving familiar actions, we can gradually decrease the amount of gesture we use so that children have to rely more on following our words. If we provide support when it is not required, it reduces the level of challenge and children may not make progress. Once they have developed the skills, the language or the concepts required to do an activity, we can give them opportunities to try out and transfer their new-found skill or knowledge to similar but more challenging tasks in slightly different contexts

Task 3 Gradually reducing support

Let's imagine that a primary school teacher wants to teach this song to her class

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 The wheels on the bus
Go round and round
Round and round
Round and round
The wheels on the bus
Go round and round
All day long | 2 The driver on the bus
Turns right and left
Right and left
Right and left
The driver of the bus
Turns right and left
All day long |
|--|--|
- 3 The children on the bus
Jump up and down
etc.

- These are the steps she follows, but they are jumbled. Put the steps in the right order
- a She narrates the song using the model bus to demonstrate the actions, eg the wheels of the bus going round
- b With some prompting from the teacher, pupils sing the song together by themselves, making appropriate hand gestures
- c She sings the song, using hand gestures to indicate the wheels of the bus going round and round. She gets pupils to make the gestures and to begin to join in
- d She introduces pupils to the key vocabulary in the song by pointing out of the window to a real bus, or showing them a model of a bus or a photo of a bus. She shows them how the wheels go round and round all day and discusses with them where the bus goes, ie

along the roads, and how it turns left and right (demonstrating with the model bus) and who travels on it. She demonstrates with model people or pictures how people get onto the bus, etc.

e Pupils think of new verses for the song, eg *The people on the bus go ... The driver on the bus goes ...* They illustrate their new verses and put them up on the wall to join the rest of the song.

f She gets pupils to recall the song by using hand gestures as cues to remind them of the words and to sing along with her. This is done on several occasions (maybe over several days).

g Pupils discuss, select and sing their favourite songs of the term and discuss why they liked a particular song.

h She asks individual pupils to come out and turn the wheels of the bus round while she sings the song.

i She divides pupils into groups and each group sings a different verse without gestures. Individuals begin verses and groups finish the verse. (This may be done on several occasions.)

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The suggested order is: 1 d, 2 a, 3 h, 4 c, 5 b, 6 f, 7 i, 8 e, 9 g. This procedure provides a great deal of support, but the nature of the support changes as children become more familiar with the activity. The context moves from the concrete to the abstract.

The idea on which this activity is based is taken from an article by D. Scott Enright.²

Task 4 Matching support to pupils' understanding and experience

- How does the teacher, in the example above, adjust support to match her pupils' level of understanding and experience of the task?
- If you were teaching this song to your class, what would you do differently?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

She adjusts the support in several ways. She moves from a concrete 'here and now' situation, where meaning is conveyed through visual and physical contextual clues, to a more abstract context where the focus is more on the language itself. At the beginning, she shows the model bus and pupils get a chance to turn the wheels. She shows the meaning of the words through physical gestures and actions in relation to the object. She then gets pupils to represent or symbolize the wheel movements and other concepts, eg *all day long*, *left and right*, through hand gestures.

Later, when the pupils are familiar with the song, they sing it without gestures or real objects. Then they create new verses based on the original pattern. Finally pupils have to compare different songs and give reasons for liking their favourite. By adjusting the context, the teacher helps to provide the pupils with the right level of support each time. She builds on what is familiar, but moving the pupils another step forward towards a greater degree of control and awareness of language.

What would you do differently?² No two teaching situations are alike and so it is very likely that you would need to make different adjustments for your pupils. You might omit some of the steps or move more quickly through them. For example, you might not need to bring in physical objects if children are very familiar with the vocabulary and concepts. On the other hand, you might find you have to move more slowly. You might not be able to get to the final step because your pupils have insufficient English or are too young to discuss the songs in this way. ■

Support is not a fixed thing. It is closely linked to the specific needs of the pupils at specific points in time. We need to gradually adjust or remove it as pupils acquire the skills and language to do activities independently.

Summary of support

concrete

d use of real objects, models, gestures or actions to show meaning of words and expressions

a

h

c use of gestures (to symbolize ideas/words) to accompany words

b

f

i words alone (without gestures)

e focus on singing it well/fluently

manipulating the words/creating new verses based on understanding the pattern of the song

g talking about the song – comparing it with other songs, ie generalizing from the experience of *The Wheels of the Bus* song. Categorizing it as a song in memory, to be stored with other songs

abstract

Try to observe the effect of adjusting the amount of support you give, using the following action plan

Action plan

Aim: To investigate the effects on pupils' performance of gradually reducing levels of support

Procedure

- Find a learning activity you want to use with your pupils, eg a song or game
- Plan how you will introduce it to the pupils and what type of support you will provide
- Plan how you will recycle the activity and the language used over three lessons in slightly different contexts, moving from the concrete to the more abstract. Use the teacher's procedures as an example to help you
- Decide how you will adjust the support provided each time
- Make a note of how many pupils were able to carry out the activity successfully on each occasion. Did some pupils need additional support?
- Reflect on what you learned about support from carrying out this plan.

5 Teachers' questions about providing appropriate support

Here are some questions that teachers often ask about the support young language learners need

- 1 How will I know when I need to reduce support?
- 2 How can you give the right support to each child when you have a class of 30?
- 3 Isn't it spoon feeding if I give support?
- 4 Even if my support helps a child do an activity today, will she be able to do it herself tomorrow?

Task 5 Questions and answers about support

- Answer the teachers' questions above and compare your answers with those given below
- What other questions do you and your colleagues have about support? What answers can you suggest?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

1 How will I know when I need to reduce support?

There is no right answer – it is a matter of trial and error to begin with. We have to learn to judge when children are ready by observing them closely when they are doing activities. If they are doing them confidently and they are successful, then it is probably time to reduce support. If we find they are having difficulty, then they may need more support.

2 How can you give the right support to each child when you have a class of 30?

It is unrealistic to expect teachers to be able to get it right for each individual. It is probably more effective in the long term to train children to become better learners so they know how to get the help they need. But we can also gain more freedom to help individuals if we put children in mixed ability groups for some activities. Stronger pupils in the group can help to support weaker pupils, leaving the teacher free to monitor and work with individuals within groups who need extra support.

3 Isn't it spoon feeding if I give support?

If you throw someone in the deep end of the swimming pool before they can swim, there is a risk that they will drown. Even if they do not drown, they may be so frightened that they are put off swimming for ever. It is the same with language learning. By providing support, we are helping pupils to learn in a more humane and enjoyable way – more like the way they learned their first language. However we need to be sure that a child is developing the necessary skills and knowledge to be able to carry out such activities independently in the end. We must be clear why we are providing the support and how we are helping the child to become able to do the activity him or herself. In other words, is he/she making progress?

4 Even if my support helps a child do an activity today, will she be able to do it herself tomorrow?

Not necessarily. To improve the chance of transfer, we need to make explicit to children, in model and state very clearly to them, the procedures and strategies necessary for doing activities. We also need to remind them when to apply these strategies. They need help in learning to make decisions about the best way of carrying out their learning activities, and in monitoring and identifying their own learning needs. This child, for example, seems to have worked out how to support himself. *If my teacher says a sentence in English and I don't understand, I think back to the last time she said it and what she said it meant.* ■

» Chapter 12

Summary

In this chapter you have considered

- *the concept of support*. Support is a kind of help you provide for pupils to enable them to carry out language learning activities successfully by themselves. The level of support is adjustable, not fixed, and depends on children's current level of ability and the level you would like him/her to move towards next
- *three main types of support: teachers' language*, ie all the things they do with language to help pupils' understand, *techniques and resources*, ie all the techniques, procedures, and resources teachers use to help children to do activities, *children themselves*, ie children provide support for each other as practice partners, by providing models, etc
- *how to assess the amount of support needed* so that the level of support provided enables each child to gain some success in doing the activity. There are a number of factors to consider, including the skills and knowledge which children already possess for doing the activity and the new skills which will be needed, the degree of contextual support provided by the activity itself, children's familiarity with the activity type and the degree of personalization
- *the need to adjust support* in tune with the progress children are making. The level of support provided is not something fixed, but should be constantly changing so as to ensure children make progress. As children gain control over the skills and language required to do particular activities, support is reduced while other more complex or challenging activities are introduced for which they may require increased support initially. Adjustment involves reducing or increasing the help provided in tune with the level of challenge, varying the contexts in which the activity is carried out by moving from concrete situations with plenty of visual support to more abstract situations which rely more heavily on language itself
- *some teacher concerns about support* which raise important issues about the question of providing support, of adjusting support appropriately and of long term gain, ie does it help children to develop?

There are no easy answers to these questions though there are several implications that follow from this chapter. The overall or long-term aim of providing support is to enable children to eventually carry out activities successfully by themselves through helping them to acquire the skills and strategies needed and the ability to apply these flexibly in a range of contexts. This theme looks forward to 'learning to learn' in Chapter 12.

The challenge for you is to develop your ability to observe and monitor children's ways of working so you can plan and provide support more sensitively and flexibly based on children's constantly changing needs. The process will provide you with a deeper understanding of how children learn language and make progress.

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- 1 Clarke, J. and Ashworth, J. 1989 *Stepping Stones 1 Activity Book*. London: Collins ELT, p56
- 2 Scott Enright, D. 1986 "Use everything you have to teach English" Providing useful input to young language learners. In Rigg, P. and Scott Enright, D. (eds.) *Children and ESL: Integrating Perspectives*. Washington: TESOL.