

RESOURCE
BOOKS FOR
TEACHERS

series editor
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VERY YOUNG LEARNERS

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Introduction

This book aims to provide activities for children which have a language bias and which are based on sound pre-school practice and educational theory.

Who is this book for?

Very young learners

In this book 'very young learners' refers to children who have not yet started compulsory schooling and have not yet started to read. This varies according to the country and can mean children up to the age of seven, so we have taken three to six years as a realistic average. What counts more than chronological age is the developmental age. This will vary according to the individual and the help and encouragement he or she has already received, either at home or in the nursery.

The children may be attending state or private nursery schools or kindergartens, and the school may teach English as a foreign language or may be an English-medium school where English is taught as a second language. Alternatively, the children may be attending private English classes outside school. The classes may be very large or very small.

The children may have had some exposure to English, or may be absolute beginners. Children learning English as a second language (ESL) may be in classes with native speakers. At the age we are dealing with, this should not be too much of a problem as native speakers are not yet proficient in their own language and still have a lot to learn.

There may be some disparity with regard to basic skills such as drawing and cutting and this needs to be borne in mind constantly.

Their teachers

There is a growing trend in many countries for children to start their language learning at a much younger age. This means that many teachers who trained to teach adults and teenagers are finding themselves with classes of very young learners. At the same time many primary and pre-school teachers whose first language is not English are being asked to teach English too.

In addition to these teachers, who have to adjust their teaching methodology, there are teachers who are in the process of being trained to teach a foreign language to early learners.

This book provides advice and ideas for all these groups of teachers.

Smoothing the way

Whether the children are new to school or simply new to the English class, there are various ways in which you can help them to adapt. It would be ideal if you could visit them in their own homes before the term starts, but this is often not practicable. Alternatively, you can invite the children, with their parents or guardians, to a little pre-term party so that they can get to know their teacher and classmates in a less formal setting. If the parents or guardians speak English, they can stimulate the child's curiosity by using it at home. You can also invite parents or guardians to attend lessons and even help.

Use of the mother tongue

It is obvious that if the children come from a variety of linguistic backgrounds or if you do not speak their language, you will have to use English as the medium of communication. In other cases, the school or education authority may insist that you do not use the mother tongue in the language class. However, many teachers are not told specifically whether they should use the mother tongue or to what extent, and consequently they are uncertain what to do for the best.

Although the ultimate objective is to use only the target language in the classroom, we feel that there is some justification for using the mother tongue, especially in the early stages. The reasons are as follows:

Security

For anyone of whatever age, learning a new language is a traumatic experience. Some language learners, like some swimmers, can be thrown in at the deep end and survive. For others the experience is so nerve-racking that they form a block. Small children, who have spent their time among loved and trusted people, need some time to adjust to the school environment. If the strangeness of a new school and unknown faces is compounded by having someone jabbering at them in a foreign language, the experience must be terrifying. For this reason it can be helpful to put them at ease by speaking to them in their own language and gradually weaning them on to using more and more English in class.

Need for communication

Children are desperate to impart information, some of which may be totally inconsequential to adult listeners but which is of great importance to them. Communication is a vital part of the learning process but if we tell the children they can only speak in English (which of course they cannot do) it is as good as telling them to be quiet. This would be a great shame in terms of the teacher–pupil relationship. Furthermore, you can use some of the things they tell you as a springboard into vocabulary or other language work, and to help you relate activities to their interests. What a child says can also give useful feedback about how the child feels at school or even at home.

Giving instructions

We may want to organize a game or explain how to make something. We often spend a long time trying to get the message across in English (and probably failing) when a couple of words in the mother tongue would make everything clear. At this stage you can give the instructions first in English and then in the mother tongue. Later on, when the children are familiar with the procedure and English phrases, you only need to use English.

Avoiding the mother tongue

Gesture

Gesture is an important tool, particularly with very young learners, who still rely on body language and facial expression to communicate. You can accompany instructions, stories, songs, and rhymes by actions, pictures, and mime to show the meaning. Some cultures have a wide variety of gestures which they use when speaking, which you can exploit if you are familiar with them.

Using English words that are similar to the mother tongue

Where possible, it may be useful to use English words that are similar in the child's own language. For example, if you teach children who speak a Romance language you may say 'Very good' followed by 'Excellent'.

However, by doing this we may be encouraging children to choose the easy option rather than helping them to use an expression which would be more natural for a native speaker. There is also the danger that they will assume that every English word which is similar to one in their own language has the same meaning, as they are unaware of 'false friends'. Never the less, we feel that the advantages in terms of

getting instant understanding and instilling confidence in the children outweigh the disadvantages.

Using international English

Nowadays many English words have been absorbed into other languages, for example, *taxi*, *hamburger*, *T-shirt*, *jeans*, *cinema*. By using some of these words we can make the learning of a new language easier.

English hats

In order to signal to the children when they must use English, you could put on a special hat, which could be any type of hat, cap, beret, or even a paper one, but should always be the same one. You tell the children that this is your 'English Hat' and that when you are wearing it you cannot speak or understand anything but English. You could extend this by getting the children to make their own English Hats out of newspaper (see 6.12, 'How to make a pirate hat'). When they are wearing their English Hats they can only speak English to you and their class-mates.

Dolls and puppets which 'only understand English' are another effective way of encouraging children to speak in English, and can help to reduce inhibitions. On the other hand, some children have no inhibitions and always want to show off what they can do.

Some teachers find that speaking English encourages the children to speak more English. However, if English is not your native language you may not be very confident about using it in class. There is some guidance on classroom English on page 17 in Chapter 1, and in the activities classroom language is given in *italic* print.

Learner characteristics

Individual attention

It is very important that small children get the teacher's individual attention as much as possible. Some will demand it by clambering on to your knee or holding your hand, but others need it just as much.

A good opportunity to give them individual attention is when they are drawing or colouring. At this point you can go round talking about what they are doing and maybe eliciting some vocabulary. It is often at this point that children will say if anything is worrying them.

Attention span

For the teacher used to an older age-group it can be quite disconcerting when a three-year-old wanders off in the middle of a

song or story to play with a toy. It does not mean they are not following what is going on; it is probably because some other child had the toy before and they see this as their only opportunity to get hold of it. We must not take it as a personal rejection. It is very difficult to hold the attention of a whole group of small children and the best way to do it is to ring the changes every five to ten minutes—unless you see that they are all really absorbed in what they are doing, in which case you can let it go on a bit longer.

It is a good idea to make a note of the things they really enjoy and which you know will get the attention of the whole group. This age-group love what is familiar and may seem indifferent to something new. By this we do not mean that you should never try anything new. On the contrary, what is new in one lesson has become familiar by the second lesson. Do not be put off when children do not readily accept an activity the first time; it is worth persisting with something you feel they will eventually like.

The 'silent period'

It is important for the language teacher to remember that young children may spend a long time absorbing language before they actually produce anything. It is not a good idea to try to force them to speak in the target language as this can create a lot of emotional stress. Even if small children are not actually saying anything, they will still be taking it in. Some children say nothing at all in class but go home and tell their parents what they have learnt. By doing repetitive songs, rhymes, games, and plenty of choral work, children will be able to produce language without the stress of having to speak individually.

Pre-school teaching

There are certain advantages in teaching the pre-school age group. One of the main bonuses for the teacher is that there are usually no strict syllabuses to follow, no tests, and no performance objectives to be met. Anything the children learn is a gain and this absence from pressure means that the classes can be an enjoyable experience for both teacher and pupils. Things do not need to be rushed and if the children enjoy a particular activity, it can be repeated over and over again.

Another advantage is that children of this age are less inhibited. They are not afraid to be imaginative and they are not yet bound by the constraints that demand that adults be logical. As they are so young, they are not carrying any negative attitudes left over from previous school experiences. They are curious about everything, keen to learn, and very receptive.

There are, of course, some difficulties to be faced when teaching very young children. They can be selfish and uncooperative. If they

want something, they will push another child over to get it and show little concern for the other child's feelings. Some of them will use temper tantrums to try and get their own way, and may scream or bite. Some may need help with going to the toilet and there could be occasional accidents with incontinence.

If a child seems withdrawn, bad-tempered, or upset, talk to the parents (or to the class teacher if this is not possible). Very young children can be strongly affected by events at home such as a new baby or moving house.

Needless to say, an enormous amount of patience is needed and some days you might get the feeling you have hardly taught them anything because it has taken so long to organize them. However, if you have been using English, they will have been learning even if you have not done a single thing on your lesson plan.

Child development and language teaching

During the pre-school years children develop better eye-hand co-ordination, their pictures become more recognizable and detailed, and they learn to do simple craft activities which involve cutting, sticking, and folding. They learn to do simple jigsaw puzzles and activities which involve recognizing similarities and differences. They learn how to sort, classify, and match things, and recognize the 'odd one out'. They are starting to learn to count and to have a concept of quality, position, size, and amount.

They are able to follow a story, predict what might come next, and ask questions about it. They can use their imagination to invent their own stories. This is the stage at which children often have an imaginary friend, and they sometimes find it hard to separate fantasy and reality. They enjoy looking at books with pictures and will often pretend they are reading the text, even when they cannot decipher the individual words. This stage often gives way naturally to real reading if children have enough contact with books and a person willing to read the stories again and again.

Children of this age are still rather self-centred and may often want to play alone and may not want to co-operate with the group. This will gradually disappear with gentle encouragement and as the desire to socialize becomes stronger. At this age children can begin to take part in organized games, although they may not be very good losers.

The role of the teacher during these pre-school years is to help the child develop in all these areas and to prepare the ground for the more formal kind of teaching that will come in primary school. Much of the learning will take place through play. It is widely recognized nowadays that play is an important part of the learning process. Childish games of 'let's pretend' help children to rehearse

for the real world and give them an opportunity to try out situations in order to learn to cope with them. Other games help to develop conceptual awareness, physical co-ordination, creativity, and social skills.

The implications of all this for the language teacher are that the main emphasis should be on the type of activities which children normally do at pre-school, adapted to language learning. Activities most suited to very young learners are those which involve songs, chants, rhymes, stories, total physical response (see below), tasks that involve drawing, colouring, cutting and sticking, games, puzzles, dressing up, acting, and 'let's pretend'.

Total physical response

Pre-school children learn through direct experience via the five senses, and do not yet understand abstract concepts. For this reason language teachers find it very useful to use what is known as 'Total Physical Response' (TPR). This means getting the children to actually do or mime what we are talking about. If a teacher says: 'Alexander, open the door, please' and Alexander opens the door, that is an example of total physical response.

The younger the children are, the more important TPR is. You can use it in many ways: for example, by getting the children to follow instructions in a game or craft activity, in miming a song, rhyme, or action, or in acting out a role-play.