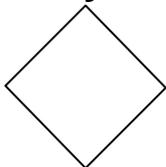


## Why use activity based learning in the young learner classroom?



Wendy Superfine\*

### “Why Use Activity Based Learning in the Young Learner Classroom?”

When we look at the reasons for why and how we teach young learners it is necessary to review a little of the history of teaching English to young learners.

It has an apparent history of erratic interest. It can be traced back over three or four centuries in developed countries where there are long standing educational traditions and an education conscious middle or upper class.

Portugal showed an interest in English earlier than Spain possibly because it was "our oldest ally". The earliest grammar for Spanish speakers was written by an expatriate native speaker called Thomas Connelly in 1784. The historical connections between England and Iberia in the marriage of Charles II to Catherine of Braganza, were influential in publications of **"A New English Grammar prescribing certain rules as the language will bear for Foreigners to learn English"**! This contains practical dialogue material but was unlikely to be used in schools as it included directions for early tourists in Spain and Portugal which told how to travel through both countries. This was an unlikely task even for older school children !

However, there has been a recent revival of interest in the teaching of English as a foreign language to young learners due to the increasing need to communicate with people of other nations in a world which has seen many recent changes in its political and geographical boundaries. This field of

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language teaching is developing rapidly in Europe where the previous experience in the teaching of foreign languages was mainly to adult and secondary school children.

Knowledge of foreign languages is a key element in the construction of European unity and also plays an important rôle in the development of cultural and economic links between neighbouring countries within the European Community. The European approach to the planning of the primary school curriculum is to incorporate an awareness of this situation. It is therefore with this aim in mind that I am going to talk about Using an activity based Curriculum with Young Learners.

First I will look at the

### **Current Claims for the Advantages of Teaching English to Young Learners**

Some recent arguments have been given by Professor R. Freudenstein of Philips University, Marburg, Germany. Also within Britain, there are departments of education which are concentrating on Teaching English to young learners which are producing more up to date research.

Professor Freudenstein headed a survey conducted in Western Europe on the situation of foreign language learning in the first four years of formal education. A survey of information on foreign language teaching to children up to the age of ten years, with special reference to the countries within the E.E.C was presented at a meeting of the F.I.P.L.V. in Sèvres in April 1989.

A number of issues were raised under the heading of the "**Advantages of Early Language Learning**".

There were three important points which were drawn from the research carried out as well as from personal observations.

#### **1. Intellectual Improvement**

It was suggested that children who learn a foreign language at an early age tend to be superior to their monolingual peers in verbal and non-verbal behaviour. Evidence was given to suggest that children's experience with two language systems seems to give them greater mental flexibility, superiority in concept formation and a more diversified set of mental abilities.

#### **2. Mother-tongue Improvement**

It was also stated that children who start learning a foreign language early in life can understand their native language system better. They become conscious of the existence of language as a phenomenon. It was agreed that learning a foreign

language at the primary level does not necessarily interfere with the development of the mother tongue or even interrupt its acquisition. Prof. Freudenstein states that "since the basic development of the Mother-tongue is supposedly finished by the age of four or five there should not be any obstructing influence from other languages at primary level".

### 3. Cultural Gains

It was proposed that children who speak foreign languages are able to acquire a wider cultural outlook compared to monolingual children who often feel that their own culture and customs are the most important. Children may be safely exposed to other languages and cultures while quite young, even before they have identified with their first language and culture. The introduction of a foreign language may help a child to develop tolerance towards people who are different, which in the long run may contribute to a better mutual understanding among nations.

It was stated however, that "positive cultural values can only result from favourable teaching situations leading to successful learning".

The favourable teaching situations are:

- ✍ **small learning groups,**
- ✍ **suitable teaching aids,**
- ✍ **appropriate methodology**
- ✍ **appropriately trained and prepared teachers.**

If these conditions cannot be ensured, early foreign language teaching might give negative results and produce unfavourable attitudes toward another culture. It was agreed that if every effort was made to ensure these conditions were provided, with the financial means to support them, the positive results of foreign language teaching should be apparent.

The advantages of early language learning were therefore, seen as cultural gains and as support for the growth of the child's character and the development of it's intellect. There is much evidence to support the view that the process of learning other languages alongside the mother tongue, must start at an early age if multilingualism is to be achieved.

### So what are the **Characteristics of Young Learners ?**

When examining the teaching of a foreign language to all age groups there are obvious similarities between adults and young learners and obvious differences.

- ✍ Young learners are only just starting their schooling so teachers have a clear opportunity to mould the mind of the child and their expectations of life in school.
- ✍ They tend to be keen and enthusiastic learners, without the inhibitions which older
- ✍ Learners sometimes bring to their schooling.
- ✍ A young child's learning can be closely tied up with their development of ideas and concepts because it is so close to their initial experience of formal schooling.
- ✍ Young learners need physical movement and activity as much as stimulation for their thinking. They have a short attention span and have very little inhibition. They are usually very spontaneous so therefore an activity approach in the form of games, songs and drama is recommended. When reviewing the situation we return to the main explanations for better learning at a younger age and the suggestion that the young brain is more adaptable before puberty and the acquisition of languages is less inhibited in the younger learner.
- ✍ It is claimed that children's language learning is more closely integrated with real communication because it depends more on the immediate physical environment than adult language, although older learners have greater ability and experience when presented with hypothetical learning situations etc.
- ✍ Finally there is the suggestion that young children have more time for language learning than older learners as they are less involved in other responsibilities.

When we look at these characteristics we must now ask

**“Why use an Activity or Task based approach ?”**

The principles behind the activity based approach is that children are “doers” and learn language primarily because they need it and remember new language better because they have encountered and used it in a realistic situation. Activity based learning recognizes that young children are physical, tactile and use all their senses. It aims to teach language and address a child's linguistic intelligence while at the same time, developing a child's other intelligences [Gardner, 1988]

Let us now look at the **Objectives of the Early Learning of English** which are illustrated in this diagram:

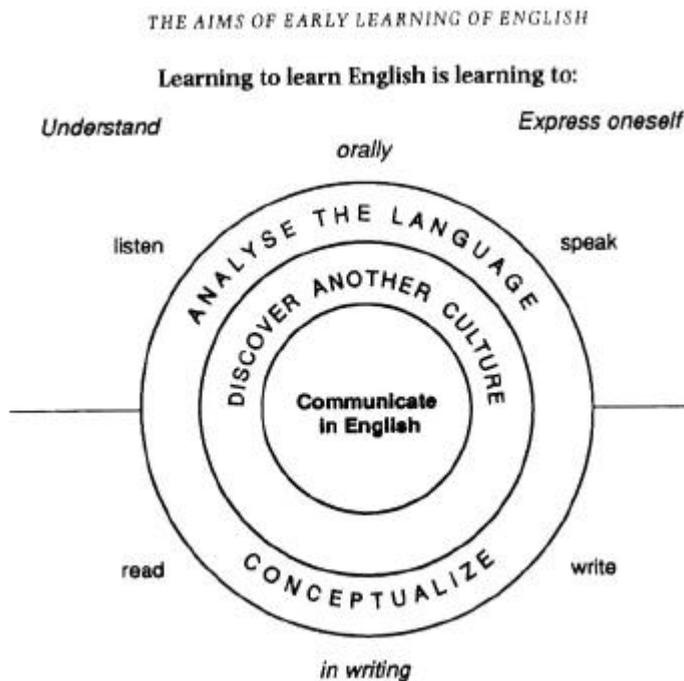


Figure 1 Objectives of early learning of English

“The Primary English Guide” J. Brewster, G. Ellis. D. Girard 1992 Penguin

The next important question is:

**What is an Activity or task based curriculum ?”**

Again an Activity based approach recognizes these objectives above by realizing that children are **active, enquiring** and **learn primarily by testing out their hypotheses about the world**. By learning English through **investigations, creativity or problem solving**, it is hoped that children are more likely to see the purpose for their learning.

**The key characteristics of an activity based learning curriculum are:**

**It is:**

- ✍ Child centred and learning centred
- ✍ Task based learning
- ✍ Gives enjoyment & an element of fun

- ✍ Combines the use of games, songs and rhymes
- ✍ Uses authentic / realistic tasks & situations
- ✍ Can be linked to a particular topic or vocabulary or feature language forms and structures
- ✍ Focuses on meaning & form
- ✍ Acquires knowledge & skills
- ✍ Uses of all four skills – once the child has mastered reading & writing in their Mother tongue
- ✍ Reflects the world around them

An activity or task based curriculum involves the use of the four skills combining the use of games, songs and rhymes which may be linked to a theme or a topic. Most primary EYL courses tend to combine topics and activities, especially within their workbooks. Activity based English teaching may highlight a particular topic, vocabulary or feature language forms and structures but it is primarily driven by the intrinsic interest of the activity for the child. It is this activity which is the focus of each lesson.

Activity or task based learning focuses on the three “C”s of **CURIOSITY**, **CREATIVITY**, and **COLLABORATION**.

### **Curiosity:**

Children whose interest is engaged by a task are capable of longer periods of attention than is usually recognised. Children who want to find out how something can be made to work or who are trying to make something of their own are driven, often, by a sense of curiosity. According to the great psychologists of our century, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner, children are instinctively programmed to learn. They are in a continual cycle of discovery, forming hypotheses, testing those hypotheses and discovering concepts and skills. They are driven by their insatiable curiosity. Ask any teacher or parent which question word children ask most frequently and they will report that it is the question “WHY?”

### **Creativity:**

Children like to make things and take things they have made home to show and share. Their creativity is more wide-ranging than a traditional reading/writing lesson allows for. Many teachers are cautious about using glue, scissors, sticky paper, sellotape, card, string and fabric in the classroom.

Of course, these materials do demand a greater degree of resourcefulness, classroom organisation and time at the end to tidy up, but the pride with which children view their achievements may be worth it. Children can take something home from their English lesson that is their own. Being able to share it with others means that the child is recycling the vocabulary and the language used to describe the process of making the object in class.

### **Collaboration:**

Activity-based learning can cater for the individual and the group. Because many potential activities are practical "doing" tasks, they enable the non-academic child to gain self-esteem. Tasks can more easily be differentiated/ adapted to suit different levels of ability. Therefore the individual with special learning needs can be supported or "scaffolded" (Bruner, 1966?)

At the same time, tasks can be performed as group activities and are often deliberately collaborative. (eg. Build a big, high tower where the princess slept for a hundred years/ Use "junk" materials to build the tower clock to show 100 years Make a collage to show a castle surrounded by a great big forest. A copy of the castle in Leiria will inspire children who live in this town !)

An example in the form of a song is:

*“There was a princess long ago, long ago, long ago*

*And she lived in a big high tower, big high tower ....*

*A wicked fairy cast a spell .....*

*The princess slept for a hundred years ....*

*A great big forest grew around .....*

*A handsome prince came riding by .....*

*He chopped the trees down one by one ....*

*He woke the princess with a kiss .....*

From “Oranges and Lemons” O.U.P.

Tasks like these can reinforce social as well as linguistic skills. For example, a group role play of a shopping trip to the greengrocer which the children have planned themselves will involve the children in decision-making, turn-taking, mutual support and constructive feedback.

The next question “**How do we develop activities in the classroom?**” starts from a **Language focus**. Once teachers have decided upon the language focus they can consider which areas of children's interests are related. Some practical examples of how teachers might integrate language structures into activities or Topic on **Transport and Transport vocabulary**. Students can use

toy cars, buses and vans and make a sloping race track out of a plank. Using a watch with a seconds hand they can conduct speed trials. They can try to make the van the fastest and the bus the slowest.

The target vocabulary will be well-remembered but, more importantly, the children will encounter other language forms, in a meaningful context.

### **Starting from an activity**

Activity based teaching tries to make EYL active, real, and challenging, offering learning experiences beyond the purely linguistic. Sometimes teachers consider a particular activity type and try to integrate it into their planning to ensure a wider range of learning and teaching styles.

The following list suggests some of the many different types of activity teachers can choose from when planning English activities with Young Learners.

#### *Different types of activity*

sequencing

sorting

measuring

predicting

testing

acting out/roleplaying

observing/comparing

memorising

dancing

singing/chanting/clapping

making music

mixing

joining

tracing

painting

colouring

drawing from life

drawing fantasy

playing games

giving instructions

growing things

cooking  
entertaining  
telling stories  
playing word games  
making up chants, rhymes and jingles

A well balanced activity based curriculum should contain most of these activities.

When we look at how we can help children to learn, there are various strategies which will help the young learner to learn in a more memorable way as shown in the following list:-

### **Making Learning Memorable – A Synthesis of Strategies**

- ✍ Use relaxation and play
- ✍ Change states and do “brain gym ”
- ✍ Use colour and shape
- ✍ Involve the auditory, visual and kinaesthetic/ haptic senses
- ✍ Use sound and music
- ✍ Use displays to reinforce learning
- ✍ Use metaphor
- ✍ Use story
- ✍ Involve the learners, eg share objectives and outcomes
- ✍ Personalise the learning
- ✍ Use a spiral curriculum
- ✍ Discuss learning to learn, learning styles and processes, eg Use “Look, cover, write and check” for spellings
- ✍ Review learning eg find at least three positives [ 80% new knowledge is lost within 24 hours without the opportunity to review ]
- ✍ Encourage feedback
- ✍ Develop self esteem

To summarise the points above, teaching English to Young Learners through an activity based curriculum involves:

- ✍ Regular and lively practice
- ✍ Task based learning
- ✍ Focuses on Curiosity, Creativity and Collaboration
- ✍ Acquires knowledge and skills
- ✍ Is active real and challenging

- ✍ Gives enjoyment and an element of fun
- ✍ Reflects the world around them

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- Child Education, Infant Projects, Nursery Projects monthly or bi monthly from Scholastic Publications with extensive material for topic work including free posters topic webs, activities, lists of resources etc. Designed for use in mainstream education but much of it applicable to primary E. F.L.