

Helping Young Children Learn English

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At age four or five many children first move from the home-centered environment – which is sometimes outside of the US – to a broader world. They are introduced to the world of school with other children and an adult who is not a member of their immediate family – their teacher. Children begin friendships that are independent of their families and teacher. Interacting with and learning from classmates – some of whom may be native English speakers – become just as important as learning from their teacher.

Most young children come to our classrooms enthusiastic to meet the challenges that await them. They are excited about doing something they've only heard about before: going to school just like their older brothers, sisters, and friends. Although some young children are very shy and some even scared, most children generally want to do everything they're supposed to do in school. They want to feel big and important; they are ready to learn.

As English teachers of young children who are new to English, we will be challenging them not only to begin their school career, but to also learn a new language. They, in turn, will challenge us to “make the learning happen” in a positive way for them. Thinking about how young children learned their native language will give us insight into how to teach them English.

Creating the Learning Environment

In order to create a learning environment and build activities that will lead young learners to succeed in learning a new language, it is first necessary to consider what they like to do. The best way to do this is to observe children. Most young children are very active – they explore their world by playing with toys, walking, running, climbing, touching, watching, listening, and making things. When children are interested in an activity, they can continue doing it for a long time. When they lose interest, they think nothing of walking away from what they were doing.

It is very important to reach all learners when teaching a new language by designing activities that appeal to their different learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and so on). For example, when children can relate new words (which are essentially abstract concepts) to tangible objects, learning a new language is not only easier for them, but also much more fun. They can sing, chant, and play games using their new words. These activities will help children who learn through listening and playing. If you add picture cards of the vocabulary words to their games, visual learners will benefit as well.

Teaching Vocabulary

When we teach new words to young children we should prepare activities where they are actively participating with the words as well as with other children. For instance, if you are teaching a unit on clothes, you may want to bring a bag or box full of clothes to class, rather than just showing pictures of clothing, as the real objects do more to create excitement about the words. In addition, having real clothing will allow you to let the children interact with the clothing in a real, concrete way rather than just looking at pictures of the items. They can

listen and follow your instructions to put on or take off a shirt or a hat. Everyone can point and say what each child has on – and clap when they get it right!

Young children will love answering *yes* or *no* to your question: *Do you want a (sweater)?* They will also gladly tell you what they have if you ask: *Do you have a (hat)?* When they know the vocabulary, they can ask you for what they want – or even play store using clothes in a box. They will begin communicating with you and their classmates in a real and natural way. They will have fun as they practice the new language without even being aware that they are learning.

Using Stories in the Classroom

Stories enchant children of all ages. Children's faces express their excitement, concern, and happiness at the events in a story that is being read to them.

If you are going to divide a longer story into parts, you may want to show posters or drawings of the whole story before you begin reading so that students get an overview of the entire story. This will provide a context for your students and make it easier for them to get the meaning of unfamiliar words. At the start of each new section, you can reread or summarize the story up to where you are beginning. The children will constantly be reviewing the storyline, characters, and language, each time understanding more and more. Children will also love retelling the story, or role-playing parts of it, using puppets and masks they have made themselves. By the time the story is finished, the children will not only know it well, but they will be able to retell it using the vocabulary and structures they have learned, as well as being able to improvise in their own words.

You can also encourage students to draw their own pictures illustrating parts of the story and use these pictures to retell the story at home to their parents, siblings, and friends. Encourage children to speak, listen to, and play with the English language – to exercise the mind, emotions and tongue together.

When students begin reading themselves, their interest in stories takes on a new dimension. They are transported to new places and situations. They want to know what is going to happen next – the story has their full attention, and you can build a full range of activities around their reading tasks.

Teaching the ABCs

For most kindergarten children, learning the alphabet and reviewing what they know about it is a great adventure. Before teaching the capital and lower-case letters of the alphabet, you may wish to teach (or review) the concepts of *big* and *small*. Use real objects to demonstrate these concepts by thinking of vocabulary that your students know; for example, *big and small books, chairs, crayons, balls, and jackets*. Put the items in a group that all the children can see, and show pairs of big and small items. First show the big object, then hold your arms wide open, and say *big!* Have children repeat. Then, holding your fingers close together, say *small*, and have children repeat.

You can then show photos of big and small animals. Point to each animal and say its size and name: *big dog / small dog*, and so on. You may also want to say the sound that each

animal makes. Point to a picture of a lion and say *grrrowl! Big lion says grrrowl. Small lion says grrrowl.* Let students come to the front of the room, point to an animal, and say the sound it makes: *(Little cat) says (meow).*

Finally, make the connection between big and small to letters of the alphabet. Put the animal pictures near alphabet pictures or posters – or write capital and small letters on the board. Say, *These are animals (point) and these are letters (point). This is a big dog / small dog. This is a big letter (T) / small letter (t). The name of this animal is “dog.” The name of this letter is “T.” The big dog says “bow wow” and the small dog says “bow wow.” The big T says /t/ and the small t says /t/.* Continue in this way until students understand that letters have names and sizes.

Other Considerations

It is also important to capture and keep young children’s attention. Since their attention spans are so short—usually not more than a few minutes—we must pace our classes so that activities don’t drag on and cause children to lose interest. Rather than carrying on with one activity for a long time, try to use the new words or structures in a number of different ways. Singing or chanting about clothes, talking about them, counting actual items, putting them into a suitcase, or playing store are all examples of ways that we can include varied activities in our class and still focus on practicing the language you want your students to learn.

As English teachers of young children, it is extremely important that we continually help our students to develop their language skills. Why? Because they may use their native language at home and school is the ideal place for them to learn their new language. We should provide as many activities as possible to practice. We must help our students to begin using English naturally and easily. Keeping all this in mind as we plan our classes, we can meet our objectives and know we have helped children begin to learn a new language in a way which makes them feel successful.

Barbara Hojel has an MA in education from Johns Hopkins University and over 34 years’ experience teaching young children and training teachers. She has led workshops and trained teachers in the US and around the world. She has authored and co-authored ESL and EFL materials for young learners, including *My ABC Storybook*, *Balloons*, *Buttons*, and *My English Book*, and is the author of the *Star* program. She has also written material for teachers, including *EFL/ESL Class Starters*, *Poems and Fingerplays*.