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Ten helpful ideas for teaching English to young learners

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Ten Helpful Ideas for Teaching English to Young Learners

Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has become its own field of study as the age of compulsory English education has become lower and lower in countries around the world. It is widely believed that starting the study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) before the critical period—12 or 13 years old—will build more proficient speakers of English. However, there is no empirical evidence supporting the idea that an early start in English language learning in foreign language contexts produces better English speakers (Nunan 1999). Levels of proficiency seem to be dependent on other factors—type of program and curriculum, number of hours spent in English class, and techniques and activities used (Rixon 2000). If an early start alone is not the solution, then what can EFL teachers of young learners do to take advantage of the flexibility of young minds and the malleability of young tongues to grow better speakers of English? As the age for English education lowers in classrooms across the globe, EFL teachers of young learners

struggle to keep up with this trend and seek effective ways of teaching.

This article contains some helpful ideas to incorporate into the TEYL classroom. These ideas come from the discussions and assignments done in an online EFL teacher education course designed for teachers, teacher supervisors, and other TEYL professionals. The participants in the online course came from a number of different classroom situations and countries in the Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. Some of the teachers worked in immersion classrooms; others saw their students in class two to three hours per week. Regardless of the country and the types of classrooms these teachers of young learners came from, the list of helpful ideas below seemed to be applicable to most situations.

To clarify for whom these ideas are targeted, it is important to define *young learner*. The online course used the definitions provided by Slattery and Willis (2001, 4): “Young Learners” (YL) were 7–12 years old; “Very Young Learners” (VYL) were defined as under 7 years of age. Although the

online course was designed to train teachers of young learners, participants discussed ideas related to their teaching situations, which focused on both YLs and VYLs. Therefore, the ideas given below can be applied to learners ranging from approximately 5 to 12 years old and can be used for various proficiency levels.

1. Supplement activities with visuals, realia, and movement.

Young learners tend to have short attention spans and a lot of physical energy. In addition, children are very much linked to their surroundings and are more interested in the physical and the tangible. As Scott and Ytreberg (1990, 2) describe, “Their own understanding comes through hands and eyes and ears. The physical world is dominant at all times.”

One way to capture their attention and keep them engaged in activities is to supplement the activities with lots of brightly colored visuals, toys, puppets, or objects to match the ones used in the stories that you tell or songs that you sing. These can also help make the language input comprehensible and can be used for follow-up activities, such as re-telling stories or guessing games. Although it may take a lot of preparation time to make colorful pictures and puppets or to collect toys and objects, it is worth the effort if you can reuse them in future classes. Try to make the visuals on thick paper or laminate them whenever possible for future use. Sometimes you can acquire donations for toys and objects from the people in your community, such as parents or other teachers. A great way to build your resources is to create a “Visuals and Realia Bank” with other teachers at your school by collecting toys, puppets, pictures, maps, calendars, and other paraphernalia and saving them for use in each other’s classes.

Included with the concept of visuals are gestures, which are very effective for students to gain understanding of language. In addition, tapping into children’s physical energy is always recommendable, so any time movement around the classroom or even outside can be used with a song, story, game, or activity, do it! James Asher’s (1977) method, Total Physical Response (TPR), where children listen and physically respond to a series of instructions from the teacher, is a very popular method among teachers of young learners.

This popular method can be used as a technique with storytelling and with songs that teach language related to any kind of movement or physical action. Children have fun with movement, and the more fun for students, the better they will remember the language learned.

2. Involve students in making visuals and realia.

One way to make the learning more fun is to involve students in the creation of the visuals or realia. Having children involved in creating the visuals that are related to the lesson helps engage students in the learning process by introducing them to the context as well as to relevant vocabulary items. In addition, language related to the arts and crafts activities can be taught while making or drawing the visuals. Certainly students are more likely to feel interested and invested in the lesson and will probably take better care of the materials (Moon 2000).

You can have students draw the different animal characters for a story or even create puppets. For example, if the story is *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, you may want to use puppets to help show the action of the story. To get students more excited about the story, have them make little pencil puppets of the three bears and Goldilocks before the storytelling. It’s a nice little art project that doesn’t have to take up too much time. If your students are too young to draw well, make copies of the characters on paper and have students color the characters and cut them out. The cut-out paper pictures can be taped to their pencils. After the storytelling, you can use the puppets to check comprehension of the story plot and have students practice the language by retelling the story using their puppets.

If you cannot spare the time in class to make the visuals you want to use, another idea is to consult the art teacher at your school (if you have one) and combine your efforts. If the art teacher is making some objects, pictures, or puppets, you could ask the teacher to make them for use in a particular storytelling or game in your class. Then, when students come to English class, they will bring their art projects to use. In addition, before the lesson, you can warm up by having students explain in English what they made in art class.

Some activities could use objects, toys, stuffed animals, or dolls. A “show and tell” activity is a perfect way to get students interested in the lesson with their own toys. The introduction to the lesson could be a short “show and tell” presentation that gives students a chance to introduce their objects in English. After this activity, get right into the lesson using the objects the students brought in.

3. Move from activity to activity.

As stated before, young learners have short attention spans. For young students, from ages 5 to 10 especially, it is a good idea to move quickly from activity to activity. Do not spend more than 10 or 15 minutes on any one activity because children tend to become bored easily. As children get older, their ability to concentrate for longer periods of time increases. So for students ages 5–7, you should try to keep activities between 5 and 10 minutes long. Students ages 8–10 can handle activities that are 10 to 15 minutes long. It is always possible to revisit an activity later in class or in the next class.

For example, if you are teaching a song or telling a story, don’t stay on that song or story the whole class time. Follow up the song or story with a related TPR activity to keep the momentum of the class going. Then have students play a quick game in pairs. As shown in this brief example, varying the types of activities also helps to keep young learners interested. Scott and Ytreberg (1990, 102) suggest creating a balance between the following kinds of activities:

- quiet/noisy exercises
- different skills: listening/talking/reading/writing
- individual/pairwork/groupwork/whole class activities
- teacher-pupil/pupil-pupil activities

When teachers mix up the pace of the class and the types of activities used, students will be more likely to stay focused on the lesson, thereby increasing the amount of language learning in class.

4. Teach in themes.

When you plan a variety of activities, it is important to have them connect to each other in order to support the language learning

process. Moving from one activity to others that are related in content and language helps to recycle the language and reinforce students’ understanding and use of it. However, moving from activity to activity when the activities are not related to each other can make it easy to lose the focus of the class. If students are presented with a larger context in which to use English to learn and communicate, then attainment of language objectives should come more naturally. Thematic units, which are a series of lessons revolving around the same topic or subject, can create a broader context and allow students to focus more on content and communication than on language structure.

It is a good idea to use thematic unit planning because it builds a larger context within which students can learn language. When teaching English to young learners this way, you can incorporate many activities, songs, and stories that build on students’ knowledge and recycle language throughout the unit. This gives students plenty of practice using the language learned and helps them scaffold their learning of new language. Common themes for very young learners are animals, friends, and family, or units revolving around a storybook, such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle, which includes food and the days of the week. As children get older, units could be based on topics such as the environment, citizenship, and shopping, or based on a website or book relevant to them.

Haas (2000) supports the use of thematic unit planning for young foreign language learners by pointing out that “Foreign language instruction for children can be enriched when teachers use thematic units that focus on content-area information, engage students in activities in which they must think critically, and provide opportunities for students to use the target language in meaningful contexts and in new and complex ways.” A good way to plan a unit is to explore what content your students are learning in their other classes and develop English lessons using similar content. Look at the curriculum for the other subjects your students take in their native language (L1) or talk to your students’ other teachers and see if you can create a thematic unit in English class related to what you find.

5. Use stories and contexts familiar to students.

When choosing materials or themes to use, it is important that you find ones that are appropriate for your students based on their language proficiency and what is of interest to them. Because young learners, especially VYLs, are just beginning to learn content and stories in their native language in school and are still developing cognitively, they may have limited knowledge and experience in the world. This means that the contexts that you use when teaching English, which may be a completely new and foreign language, should be contexts that are familiar to them. Use of stories and contexts that they have experience with in their L1 could help these young learners connect a completely new language with the background knowledge they already have. Teachers could take a favorite story in the L1 and translate it into English for students or even teach the language based on situations that are found in the native country, especially if the materials the teachers have depict English-speaking environments that are unfamiliar to students.

This is not to suggest that stories and contexts from the target culture should not be used. Certainly one goal of foreign language instruction is to expose students to new languages and new cultures in order to prepare them to become global citizens in the future. However, teachers should not be afraid to use familiar contexts in students' L1 in the L2 classroom. In fact, even when presenting material from the target, English-speaking cultures, it is always a good idea to relate the language and content to students' home culture to personalize the lesson and allow students an opportunity to link the new content and language to their own lives and experience. Young learners are still making important links to their home cultures, so it is important to reinforce that even in L2 instruction.

6. Establish classroom routines in English.

Young learners function well within a structured environment and enjoy repetition of certain routines and activities. Having basic routines in the classroom can help to manage young learners. For example, to get students' attention before reading a story or to get them to quiet down before an activity, the teacher

can clap short rhythms for students to repeat. Once the students are settled down, the teacher can start the lesson by singing a short song that students are familiar with, such as the alphabet song or a chant they particularly enjoy. Here is a chant with TPR that can get students ready to begin the class.

Reach up high! (Children reach their arms up in the air)

Reach down low! (Children bend over and touch their toes.)

Let's sit down and start the show! (Children sit down.)

Look to the left! (Turn heads to the left.)

Look to the right! (Turn heads to the right.)

Let's work hard and reach new heights!

The movements can be substituted to teach new words. For example, instead of "Look to the left! Look to the right!" the teacher can use "Point to the left! Point to the right!" Providing some variation can keep this chant engaging. Just remember to keep the ending since it starts the class on a positive note.

Add classroom language to the routines as well. When it's time to read a story, the teachers can engage students in the following dialogue:

Teacher: It's story time! What time is it, everyone?

Students: It's story time!

Teacher: And... what do we do for story time?

Student: We tell stories!

Build on this language by adding more after students have mastered the above interaction. The teacher can follow up the previous interaction with: "That's right! The story is called *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. What's the story called?" (Students answer.) Whatever the routine is, the teacher should build interactions in English around that routine. As Cameron (2001, 10) points out, "...we can see how classroom routines, which happen every day may provide opportunities for language development." The example below illustrates how the teacher and students can have real communicative interactions in English using some classroom language.

Teacher: Good morning, class!

Students: Good morning, Ms. Shin.

Teacher: Faida, what day is it today?

Faida: I don't know.
Teacher: Okay, then ask Asli.
Faida: Asli, what day is it today?
Asli: Today is Tuesday.
Teacher: Good! And what is Tuesday?
Students: Tuesday is Storytelling Day!

Notice that the communication is real and that a routine has been established—that Tuesday is Storytelling Day. Once students become fluid with certain interactions, as in the example above, you can begin introducing more language into the daily routines.

7. Use L1 as a resource when necessary.

Because many interpretations of various communicative approaches try to enforce the “English only” rule, teachers sometimes feel bad when they use L1. Teachers these days are mostly encouraged to teach English through English, especially at the younger ages. One reason is to give students the maximum exposure to the English language. Why not use L1? It is one quick, easy way to make a difficult expression such as “Once upon a time” comprehensible. After you quickly explain a difficult expression like that in L1, students will recognize the expression in English every time it comes up in a story. Since EFL teachers usually have a limited amount of time with students in many classroom situations, that time is too precious to waste. If it is more efficient to use L1 for a difficult expression or word, just use it. Concentrate on building communicative skills. Save your time for the target language that is actually within students' reach. For words that students can figure out, the teacher can rely on visuals, realia, and gestures. Important in the decision to use L1 to translate new language is carefully defining the language objectives for the activities. The teacher should spend class time focusing on those target language objectives rather than spending time trying to make a difficult word or expression comprehensible in English.

In addition, some students who have very low proficiency can easily become discouraged when all communication in the classroom must be in English. Sometimes these students can express comprehension of English in their native language, and this can be acceptable for lower level students. However, whenever possible, take the answers in L1 and recast them

in English. In addition, directions for many activities can be quite complicated when explained in the L2, so consider using L1 when it is more important to spend time doing the activity rather than explaining it. In short, use L1 in the classroom as a resource for forwarding the learning process without becoming too reliant on it.

8. Bring in helpers from the community.

If possible bring in helpers—parents, student teachers from the local university, or older students studying English—to tell a story or help with some fun activities. Collaborate with others who are studying English, studying to be English teachers, or who speak English well in order to expand the English learning community. Having someone new and interesting do a storytelling can get students more excited and create a break in the regular routine. The best scenario would be to carefully coordinate the guest with your language objectives. Using helpers means taking extra time to communicate your expectations with the guest and working this special event into your lesson plan.

Besides storytelling, helpers could assist in the class when you want to do group work or cooperative activities. With young learners, group activities can be hard to coordinate, so utilize volunteers in the community to help manage the class for special activities. For example, you may have stations set up around the classroom, each station representing information about the seven continents. Students need to collect information about the geography, wildlife, and countries from each continent. If you have English-speaking volunteers at each station, then students will be more likely to stay on task.

9. Collaborate with other teachers in your school.

As mentioned in #4 (*Teach in themes*), it is useful to find out what students are learning in their other classes, in their native language. Collaborate with other teachers in your school to make the learning experience richer for your students. Connect your lessons to the topics, activities, and stories your students are learning in their native language by planning related thematic units that parallel the learning in other subjects. Since students learn lan-

guage better when it is connected to their real life, it is a good idea to consider what else they are learning in a school day. Most children's lives revolve around home and school, so try to coordinate with other teachers to find out what is relevant to students; then add English instruction on top of that.

If other teachers at your school are willing, visiting each others' classrooms can be a wonderful way to get to know what is being learned in each others' classes and how. It can aid in the creation of more effective lessons for students and can increase their ability to make connections between language and content. If teachers have some anxiety about being observed, Crandall (1998, 4) suggests that, "A focus on shared students and their attempts to negotiate meaning and construct understandings in both classes can help keep the attention focused on student learning, rather than on teacher effectiveness." Then the EFL and content teacher can view the observation as a great opportunity to build bridges between the language and content for their students.

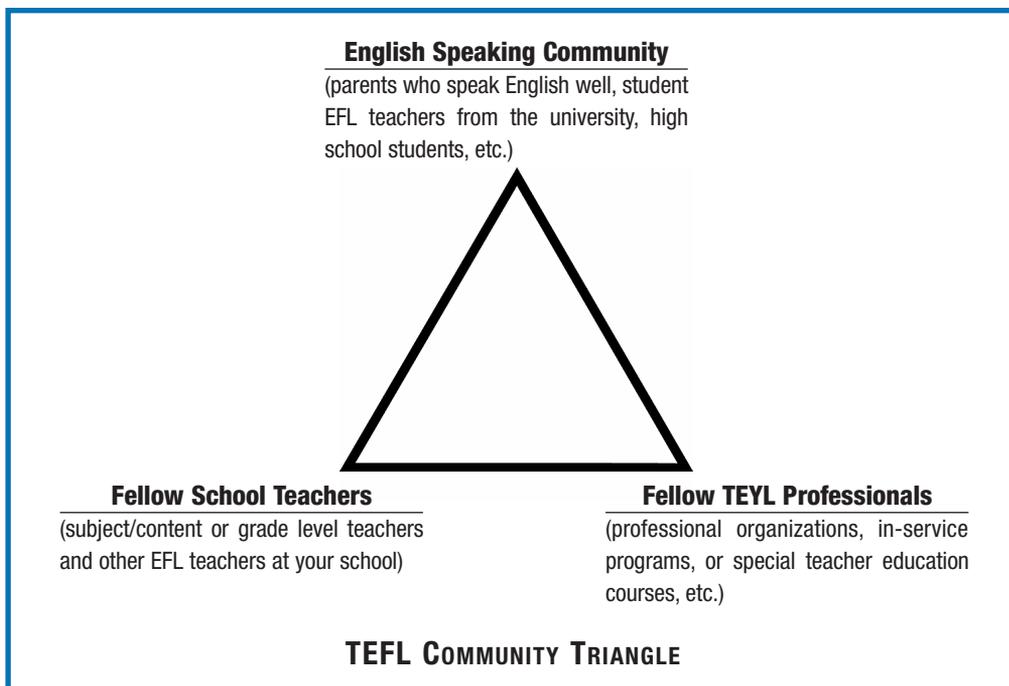
10. Communicate with other TEYL professionals.

As helpful as it may be to collaborate with the other teachers at school to see what content is most relevant to students, it is also important to keep in contact with other

TEYL professionals, both in your local area and internationally. Doing so through local and international professional organizations, in-service programs, or special teacher education courses, such as an online TEYL course, helps to keep you current with trends in the field. Most importantly, keeping in contact with other TEYL professionals helps keep your classroom fresh with new ideas, and collaboration can help to construct new ideas and solutions to the common problems that teachers face.

The importance of community and collaboration

Finally, one of the most important ideas to take from this article is the importance of community for learning. Learning a language is never an individual endeavor, and neither is teaching. Although teachers can feel quite isolated in their classrooms, it is important to remember that openness, collaboration, and sharing are the keys to enrich your teaching and your students' learning. The last three ideas presented in this article encourage expanding this community of learning. It is what I call the *TEFL Community Triangle*, which refers to a community of English-speaking and English-teaching members of both local and international communities that EFL teachers belong to that can help



enrich their English-teaching practices—in this case, to enhance the teaching of EFL to young learners.

Since TEYL is a relatively new field worldwide, it is important to utilize these various communities as much as possible as resources for improving the YL classroom. No matter where you are, what type of class or curriculum you have, who your students are, or how limited your budget may be, the availability of people and ideas most certainly abound. It is important for those in the TEYL profession to stay connected with each other and with the local community in this most important endeavor of educating our children.

Conclusion

As this article demonstrates, the ideas that come out of a collaborative learning situation like an online TEYL course whose participants come from many different countries around the world can be very helpful towards improving classroom practice. All of the ideas given above stood out—after reflection by and discussion among many professionals in the field—as some of the more helpful ideas for teaching EFL to young learners. These activities should prove helpful to all teachers of English to young learners.

TEYL is a dynamic field that is sure to change in the years to come as Ministries of Education around the world keep lowering the age of compulsory English education, as established TEYL programs become better developed, and as teachers of English to young learners become better trained. Therefore, we must continue this dialogue through our professional communities to find more helpful ideas for Teaching English to Young Learners.

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