



Playing with vocabulary

Gaye Koçer suggests some language learning games.

'The more students use their language skills for enjoyment, the more language ability they are likely to acquire.'
(Julian Edge)

My 14 years of teaching English were full of joy, excitement and interest – until I tried to teach a class of 25 six year olds for four hours of English every week. Our coursebook contained big colourful pictures of various objects and my main aim, and that of my fellow first-grade teachers, was to familiarise these young learners with English vocabulary and to promote the formation of a positive attitude to language learning in general. I soon realised that it was unrealistic simply to present the new words to the children in their colourful book and expect them to remember them all. I tried different ways of presenting the new vocabulary, such as using flashcards and bringing actual objects to class, which worked quite well. However, the following problems still arose:

- 1 The children forgot the new words very quickly.
- 2 They were not always able to use the new words.
- 3 They were reluctant to participate in the lessons and soon lost motivation.

As I was new to teaching such young learners, I decided that I needed to learn more about them. I started by learning about their likes, dislikes and characteristics.

Children's characteristics

Teachers of young learners need to know what children at the same level as their students are capable of doing. Wendy Scott points out:

'Learners of five to seven years old:

- ★ *can talk about what they are doing,*
- ★ *can tell you what they have done or heard,*
- ★ *can tell you what they think,*
- ★ *can use their vivid imagination,*
- ★ *can understand direct human interaction,*
- ★ *can understand situations more quickly than they understand the language used,*
- ★ *have difficulty in knowing what is fact and what is fiction,*
- ★ *cannot see things from someone else's point of view,*
- ★ *cannot decide for themselves what to learn,*
- ★ *have a very short attention and concentration span,*
- ★ *seldom admit that they do not know,*
- ★ *are enthusiastic and positive about learning when they are praised and constantly motivated.'*

As young learners are subject to rapid mood changes and often find it difficult to sit quietly, teachers need to be creative in finding a large variety of activities that will interest them.



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Moreover, as children in the very early stages of primary school education may not be able to read and write, teaching needs to be based mainly on listening and speaking. Games seem to represent the most fertile area for activities that will work well with young children.

Children's games

When deciding on what games to use in my classroom, I was influenced by Piaget, who defines the stage that children in primary school are usually at as 'the concrete operational stage of cognitive development, meaning that they learn through hands-on experiences and through manipulation of objects in the environment'. I also found support from Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. He asserts that 'children learn in social contexts, in groups where some group members know more than others. This principle suggests that children need not only hands-on or direct experiences, but also experiences where they are interacting and learning both from adults and other children'.

The thing to be kept in mind is that the teacher needs to interact with the children in English as much as possible, making use of what Krashen calls 'comprehensible input' and using English that is related directly to the activities in which the children are engaged.

As Fawui points out, it is important to 'try to avoid the frustration that can result from [students] not being able to make appropriate responses a game may call for ... The teacher should work out beforehand what language items are likely to be needed in the course of the game so that it can be played with maximum success and enjoyment'. Besides, enabling learners to communicate with each other, using teams and groups helps to reduce the individual pressures of competition, which can be discouraging for shy learners.

Note: When playing games, don't forget to use expressions like *please*, *thank you*, *very good*, *great*, etc, to show respect to the students, to encourage them more and to make them feel secure. Praising students for what they have done and accepting whatever they say and correcting it later will help to create a safe class atmosphere and give the children a sense of achievement.

1 Flashcard game

- 1 Put the students in groups of five and hand out flashcards with animal pictures at random. There should be several flashcards for each animal.
- 2 Tell the students that when you imitate the sound of an animal, eg a dog, those students who have pictures of dogs have to hold up their cards and call out the name of their animal. They then move seats so that all the dogs are sitting together.
- 3 After finding the other members of their group, the children with dog cards say loudly *We like dogs!*
- 4 Repeat with the other animals until all the children are sitting in the correct animal groups.

2 Memory game

- 1 This game is based on concentration and memory. You will need two identical sets of cards with pictures of animals. Mix up the sets and lay them face down on the floor or table.
- 2 Tell the children to take turns to turn over two cards. If the cards match, the child who turned them over must say the name of the animal and can then keep the cards. As it is not a competition, you will find that they will cooperate and some kids will shout 'No, no, that's the cat!'

3 Envelope game

- 1 For this game you will need a big envelope and some animal flashcards (or flashcards of some other topic you are teaching). Cut eight

'windows' in one side of the envelope with one edge still attached so they can be opened or closed. Write the numbers one to eight on the flaps of the windows. Put the flashcards in the envelope making sure that one part of each animal can be seen through each window.

- 2 Ask the students in turn to choose a number. Open the corresponding window and ask them to identify the animal from the small part that can be seen. (To make the game more enjoyable, use a puppet to ask the questions to the children and open the window.) If the answer is correct, say 'Very good [Ayse], thanks' and encourage everybody to applaud. If not, say 'Sorry Ayse, maybe next time'. Another child can then choose another window and see if they can identify the animal. Once an animal has been guessed, remove that flashcard from the envelope and start again with the next one.

4 Listen and match

This game is adapted from one described by Wendy Scott. It acts as a listening comprehension exercise where the children have to place the right food in front of the right animal while listening. It enables them to revise the topics of food and animals.

- 1 Give each student a sheet of paper with a picture of four animals sitting at a table and another sheet with food pictures on it. Ask them to cut out the different food pictures before they start to listen.
- 2 As they listen to the text, tell them to put the correct food pictures in front of the animals mentioned. The text should be read slowly and should be matched to the level of the learners.

Example text: *Rabbit Timmy is very very hungry. He wants carrots, milk and cake. The cat, Mrs Ginger, likes toast. She wants toast, butter and tea. Mr Hiss, the snake, is not hungry so he only wants an egg. Little bird Jim likes hamburgers very much. He wants two hamburgers and a coke.*