

Five Elements of Teaching English to Young Learners: An Example from Little Red Riding Hood

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Abstract

The author presents her approach to teaching English as a foreign language to kindergarten-aged children. The article describes five elements of the approach. According to the author it is of vital importance to create a positive learning environment in the classroom for young learners and to help them associate learning English to having fun. That can be very helpful later when children learn English at a higher level and when they communicate in English to other people. Learning through stories, arousing children's interest to learn English, using a play as a teaching method, introducing rhymes and songs and preparing well designed worksheets can be achieved when a teacher of English introduces a simple story in English: the *Little Red Riding Hood*.

La autora presenta su enfoque de enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera a niños de pre-escolar de 5 a 6 años. Según la autora es muy importante crear un ambiente de enseñanza positivo en la clase de niños pequeños y ayudarles a experimentar el aprendizaje del inglés de una manera divertida. Esto puede ayudar a los niños más tarde cuando ellos aprendan el inglés en un nivel más alto y cuando se comuniquen en este idioma con otras personas. El aprendizaje a través de los cuentos, el despertar el interés por el aprendizaje del inglés, el uso de los juegos como método de enseñanza, la introducción de las rimas y del cuento, y la preparación de materiales bien diseñados se pueden alcanzar cuando el profesor de inglés introduce un cuento sencillo en este idioma – *La Caperucita Roja*.

Introduction

In this article I present story-based activities I have developed from my experience as a teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL) to young beginners aged five to six years old. By introducing a simplified story adapted from the traditional fairy tale *Little Red Riding Hood* (LRRH) I try to include different amusing activities in my teaching. My objectives are to create a positive learning environment for children and to help them learn as much English as possible. My approach to using traditional narratives to teach young EFL children integrates five main features:

1. Learning through stories
2. Arousing children's interest to learn English
3. Using play as a teaching method
4. Introducing rhymes and songs
5. Carefully prepared worksheets

I will describe each of these features as I implemented them using the LRRH story.

Five elements to teaching English to younger learners

1. Learning through stories

Telling stories in a foreign language is an essential part of language learning. It is of great importance to tell stories to children in mother tongue and it is also a very important aspect of any foreign language learning. Stories help young students to concentrate, memorise and practise linguistic structures in a spontaneous and relaxed way. For young beginners it is a great pleasure to hear a story in English that has already been read to them in their mother tongue with their parents or with their teachers. I deliberately choose a story I am sure all children are familiar with.

At the beginning of the lesson I use the students' L1 to explain to them that we are going to learn the story of the Little Red Riding Hood. First, I invite them to tell the story in their mother tongue. I encourage all children to participate and to say at least one simple phrase, so that no one is left out of the activity. Therefore, in order to activate their background knowledge about the story, I will have a short question and answer session in their mother tongue, which would include the following kind of interaction:

- Teacher: Who can tell me something about the story Little Red Riding Hood?
 Marie: It's about a girl who wears a red coat.
 Teacher: Which animals are there in this story?
 Ana: There is a wicked wolf who wants to eat the Grannie and the little Red Riding Hood.
 Teacher: Why does the girl visit her Grannie?
 Jan: Because her Grannie is ill
 Teacher: What presents does the girl bring to her Grannie?
 Tjaša: Sweets, cakes and fruits.

Then I start telling the story in English: I use simple sentences, gestures and mimics and I show them pictures from the book. Although the children cannot understand many of the words in English, it is important for them to hear the story, and I am very conscious about how I model the pronunciation and intonation. I then tell the story again, but this time I tell it using story characters made out of board paper. I give the figures to the children, and as I tell them that they can actively take part in the story by acting out what the characters are doing as I narrate it. They really enjoy this acting-out of the story, and this technique allows students to participate in the study, and has two elements that are important for young beginner students. First it minimizes the demands on them to produce language, since this is difficult because they lack confidence and vocabulary to express themselves. Second, it exposes them to contextualized input.

2. Arousing children's interest to learn English

Children find the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* motivating and engaging. Even though I read the story with them multiple times, each time presenting the same book we can use different follow-up activities. Since the LRRH story involves a forest setting with animals, one way that I introduce the story and get the children's attention is to use my collection of stuffed animals. I bring a bag full of the

soft toys in the classroom without showing them what is inside: when children see it they are very curious to know what is in the bag. They start asking in their mother tongue: "Teacher, what have you got in your bag? What are we going to learn today?" They are allowed to put their hands in the bag and they try to guess what is inside, without looking. Lightbown and Spada (1993) stress that "the most important factor in second language acquisition success is motivation" (p. 160). Thus the children are motivated to find out what is inside the bag and at the same time they are willing to gain new knowledge. The guessing game helps draw them in to be more curious about what happens next. Then I explain to them that we are going to learn about animals living in a forest.

3. Using a play as a teaching method

I often look for ways to incorporate elements of play into my teaching. All play is good for learning, especially for kindergarten-aged children, but the types of play that I use are specifically designed to help students with the English language acquisition. In particular, I like to use stuffed animals, puppets, dolls, and figures to stimulate interaction in the target language. Little kids are natural role-players, and using toys is an excellent way to bring out certain words and expression in English. For the LRRH activities, we sit in the circle: I take a teddy bear out of the bag and I introduce the word **bear**. I point to the toy and introduce the colour. I say very clearly in English: "The bear is brown. Hello, bear." I repeat my greeting and then pass the toy around the circle so that each child can greet and pet the toy.

Two or three new vocabulary words for animals are introduced each lesson. Children repeat new words by playing a simple game called *Little Red Riding Hood, can you catch me?* Each child is given a soft toy from my bag, and one pupil acts the Little Red Riding Hood. We say the words for all the animals we have learned so far, then the child acting the Little Red Riding Hood tries to catch the children holding soft toys in their hands. When she/he catches the child who is holding the bird, for example, the child repeats the word "bird." She/he takes a seat and then the Little Red Riding Hood puts the toy into my bag and continues catching the other children.

We also play a hide and seek game. One child acting as the Little Red Riding Hood has to count to ten or to fifteen and the others hide. They are holding soft toys in their hands. Then the Little Red Riding Hood walks around the classroom and finds different animals. The activity ends when all the animals are recovered. Children have a lot of fun playing these games and fun is always motivating. They learn without realizing they are doing so.

Finally, I extend this game by adding a little more language to reinforce the vocabulary and introduce some more words in context. For this game, all the children cover their eyes, while they count to fifteen (in English to reinforce the numbers) I hide the soft animals so that they are not very difficult to find, such as behind the books, behind the curtain, under the chair, or under the table. Following this, we walk around the classroom and look for the animals. When we locate the animal I say: "Look! Where is bird? Bird is under the table." This is how children not only repeat the words but also playfully learn another language. Another important fact is that through playing children learn social skills: they

learn to cooperate, to be tolerant and to listen to each other. All that leads to better discipline in the classroom.

4. Introducing rhymes and songs

For some small children it is rather difficult to sit during the lesson, that is why I include a lot of movement, singing and saying rhymes in my lesson planning. From my experience working with kindergarteners, I have found that lessons for young beginners should not be longer than 20 to 25 minutes, or even shorter. Therefore when planning lessons for young learners, teachers should also consider their short attention span.

We begin lessons standing in a circle and we greet each other with a *Hello Song* (Graham, 1994). The lessons are ended with a *Goodbye Song*. In this way English teachers can establish their own routines and organisation of the lesson, and songs are also an effective way of introducing input. Halpern (1999) stresses that "of the many factors that influence learning, few are as far-reaching – or little understood – as sound and music" (p. 1). Language from songs can be used to encourage children to converse and to give their opinions. One of the children's favourites is *Listen Carefully* (Graham, 1994, p. 7). When dancing and singing the song children learn words for body parts, including the correct pronunciation. They learn to act out the instructions, such as: *sit down, stand up, turn around, touch the ground, be quiet, listen, look, draw*, and so forth. The instructions can be presented with pictures. As children enjoy acting out the instructions the teachers can find many various ways of doing this activity.

For my *Little Red Riding Hood* lesson, I choose a song that I can adapt to fit the story, or in this case adapt the story to fit the song. With the song *The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round* (King, 1989, p. 39), I invite children to join the Little Red Riding Hood on her visit to her Grandma's house. We sing the song and play a game that we call "Bus game." We make a column and we walk around the room singing the song. Then we learn the words for some other means of transport: I prepare pictures of vehicles and ask them: "How shall we travel to Grandma's today? Shall we travel by train? Let's travel by train!" I show them the picture of a train. I repeat the word "train" to them a few times and have them say it back to me. Again we make a column, all the children repeat the word train, and we walk around the room making rhyming train sounds. In the same way we learn some other words for vehicles, such as car, helicopter, bicycle, boat, plane, and motorbike. Not only do the children find this activity very amusing and relaxing, it also enables the teacher to take advantage of children's energy and channel it into learning. Murphey (1992) stresses the importance of using kinesthetic activities for L2 acquisition with younger learners: "with young children, language divorced from action seems to be mostly forgotten" (p. 17).

Another successful follow-up activity is preparing gifts for "Grandma's birthday party." I invite children to help Little Red Riding Hood choose presents for her Grandma. Children like to listen and explore the same storybook several times, which reinforces key vocabulary and simple phrases. This activity enables the teachers to introduce any input they find suitable for the children's needs. I choose the words for fruits and other kinds of food. I show them a picture of a

banana and I say: "This is a banana. It's very good. Do you like a banana? Bananas are very healthy fruits." Using this technique, children learn the words very quickly, I help them to expand their vocabulary and to learn to implement it with some new expressions. For instance, I ask them questions: "What colour is a banana? It's yellow. Do you like banana ice-cream? Who likes banana fruit cake?" When I do these kinds of activities, I talk a lot in English to my pupils, since they need to hear English to be able to copy it. Not everything I say – the input – will be comprehensible input for them, but by carefully using intonation and stress to emphasize key words, they can understand what I mean. Children, unlike older L2 English students, are much better hearing and tolerating language that they don't understand, because their affective filters are lower. I follow up this activity by bringing realia to the classroom. I invite children to name the fruits and other kinds of food in my bag and then we put them into the Little Red Riding Hood's bag.

In a very similar way as the previous mentioned activity, we act out Grandma's birthday party. We start the activity singing the *Happy Birthday Song* (Graham, 1994, p. 25). One child acts as Grandma and all other children act as Little Red Riding Hoods offering her fruits and other presents from the basket. Children learn new expressions such as *here you are*, *thank you very much*, and *what a lovely present*. At the same time they repeat words for fruits. The activity enables them to repeat and revise the language they have learned so far. According to Cameron (2001), "vocabulary needs to be met and recycled at intervals, in different activities, with new knowledge and new connections developed each time the words are met again[...] A new word needs to be met at least five or six times before it has any chance of being learnt" (p. 84).

5. Carefully prepared worksheets

We usually start the English class with circle time as a whole group, then pupils are invited to take their seats and do the worksheets. This is usually called "seatwork." It prepares students for the extended individual academic work they will do in later grades; however for five and six-year-olds I limit seatwork to less than 20 minutes. Sitting at the tables they work individually or they do group or pairwork. In order to enhance both mother tongue and foreign language learning, teachers should work on fine and gross motor skills, observational skills, memory skills and on eye-to-hand coordination. All of these can be provided by carefully prepared worksheets. Worksheets should allow children to revise the English language learnt in previous activities and give the children practice in skills for their general development. Children like tracing, colouring, sticking, cutting figures of board paper, matching and drawing. Doing the worksheets allows them to enjoy the pleasures of a task well-done. The worksheets are then hung on the classroom walls or children put them in their folders to take them home. I take particular care to prepare special worksheets for special occasions, such as different festivals like Shrove Tuesday (an important holiday before Easter celebrated in Slovenia), Easter, Christmas, Celebration of Spring, Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and Father's Day. Children are also very happy to get a special worksheet for their birthdays.

Conclusion

In this short article, I have used the example of unit of lessons I have developed around the story *Little Red Riding Hood* to illustrate five main elements of my approach to teaching younger children: Learning through stories, arousing children's interest to learn English, using play as a teaching method, introducing rhymes and songs, using carefully prepared worksheets. The types of activities mentioned do not just concentrate on linguistic skills, but provide development of the whole child. All the children in the group are involved, from the shyest to the most outspoken and particular care is being taken that no one is left out. There are many opportunities for development of social skills through different forms of interaction: pairwork, groupwork and whole class. Seeing the actions, hearing the words and acting out movements all make the lessons enjoyable and richer ones. Young learners experience at an early age that learning English can be associated as a lot of fun and they become more confident in their use of language. That is of vital importance and can be very helpful later when they learn English at a higher level and when they communicate in English to other people. Since children enjoy hearing the language of story-books, different stories can be introduced, according to children's needs and according to the local context. I find this type of work with children a rewarding experience and it results in my professional and personal growth.

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Betka Pišlar is a primary school teacher in Slovenia, in Europe. She has been working as a teacher of English as a foreign language for more than 20 years. Her work experience include teaching English as a foreign language to high school students, to primary school children, to young beginners and to adults. Currently she is teaching English in The Žiri Primary school. Her main educational interest is motivating children to learn English.