

## Teaching Young Language Learners

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I really appreciate the two-week teacher development, language & methodology refresher (young learners) course at Bell Teacher Campus, Homerton College in Cambridge. Our trainer, Ms. Amanda Bailey, has got sixteen years of teaching experience and has enlightened us a lot of profitable information about how to teach young language learners.

We know that working with young language learners in the primary classroom can be both a rewarding and a demanding experience. To make the most of that experience for both learners and teachers, we need to be very clear what we are trying to do.

The definition of “young learners” is from age 7 to 12. In Taiwan, we distinguish this range of age from the first graders to the sixth graders in primary school. The

methodologies of teaching young learners are very different from those junior or senior high school students and grown-ups. Young children do not come to the language classroom empty-handed; instead, they bring with them an already well-established set of instincts, skills and characteristics which will help them to learn another language. Therefore, we need to identify those and make the most of them.

However, as Brewster remarks, “Of course we must remember that chronological age is not always the same as developmental age. Individual difference in learners, both within and across age bands, is especially marked at primary level.” That reminds us that the boundary of age bands might also be blurred.

Ms. Bailey declares that young learners are already very good at interpreting meaning without necessarily understanding the individual words. So, we can support and help them develop these skills by using gesture, intonation, demonstration, actions and facial expressions to convey meaning parallel to what we are saying.

Ms. Bailey quoted some descriptions of young learners adapted from Haliwell:

Young learners

- already have great skill in using limited language creatively: We need to provide young learners with occasions when the urge to communicate makes them find some way of expressing themselves and the language demanded by the activity is unpredictable. Playing games is a good example of this type of occasion.
- frequently learn indirectly rather than directly: Young learners’ capacity for conscious learning of forms and grammatical patterns is relatively undeveloped. We need to make the most of opportunities where the learners’ attention is on the task and they are learning the language indirectly, for example, guessing games.
- take great pleasure in finding and creating fun in what they do: Through their sense of fun and play, young learners make the language real for themselves. Children have an

enormous capacity for finding and making fun. We need to see this and respond positively, even when the fun element of an activity isn't part of our original plan.

-- have a ready imagination: We want to stimulate the children's creative imagination so that they want to use the language to share their ideas, e.g., draw and describe the monster that lives down the hole on the next page.

-- love to talk: They can learn about the language, but the only way to learn to use it is to use it. So our job is to make sure that the desire to talk is working for learning, not against learning.

Due to the above qualities, we know that very young children are able to understand what is being said to them even before they understand the individual words. Intonation, gesture, facial expressions, actions and circumstances all help to tell them what the unknown words and phrases probably mean. Children get the instinct for interaction and talk. We are fortunate as language teachers that we can build on it. Without talking, they can not become good at using it.

Ms. Bailey also asked us to look at the following description from Slattery. I do agree with the following descriptions. Children from 7 to 12

- are learning to read and write in their own language
- are developing as thinkers
- understand the difference between the real and the imaginary
- can plan and organize how best to carry out an activity
- can work with others and learn from others
- can be reliable and take responsibility for class activities and routines

Therefore, as teachers of young learners, we need to base our teaching approaches on the natural capacities and instincts children bring to the classroom. Maybe we can discuss the topic first, and then enter into the textbook. After the sharing of their daily experience, they

will find the information we give are useful.

According to Ms. Bailey, we need to develop a positive response among children to languages and to language learning (attitude goals) as well as to what they learn (content goals). In other words, it's necessary to promote confidence and avoid over-checking or over-correcting.

It is also very important to make sure that we set up various forms of real language use as part of the process of learning, and not just as the intended final product. That is, we need real communicative activities and we need to teach in English. The conversation-driven activities that come along with the use can effectively arouse their interests toward language learning.

When we are teaching 7-12 year olds, we can encourage them to read in English stories, comics, and reading games or work meaning out for themselves. It's a good way to use a wider range of language input as their model for language use. Also, we may encourage creative writing and help them to experiment with language by those stories.

Most of the primary level learners don't know the needs to learn language; therefore, teachers need to motivate and develop them. There are many good language teaching ideas to give children periods of sustained calm and independent work with our declared intention to promote interaction and communication. We can depart the activities into the stir and the settle factors.

Ms. Bailey reveals that some language activities stir a class and some settle a class. In a positive sense, "stir" means that the activities wake them up and stimulate them; but in a negative sense, it may be that the activities over excite them or allow them to become unconstructively restless. On the contrary, some "settle" activities, put it positively, can calm a class down; but put it negatively, some activities will bore the class.

**Stirrers** that re-energize a tired and distracted class can be like oral work, competitions

or doing plays. For example:

-- **Run and touch** or Bring me a .... For very young learners ‘Touch something yellow the door / the lion (that’ll be a flashcard rather than the real thing!)’. OR divide students into groups and ask them to ‘bring me a pencil case’, etc. First group to produce object wins a point. It could also be done with flashcards on the floor: ‘Bring me a giraffe’.

-- **Pictionary.** Two teams. One student from each team is shown a word that they have to draw on the board/ on paper. Team members shout out ideas. First team to say the word wins a point.

-- **Jump the line.** Students stand in a line facing the teacher at the front of the class. The teacher says a word. If it contains an /l/ sound, they jump right, if it contains an /i:/ sound, they jump left. If they jump the wrong way or are the last person



to jump, they are eliminated. It could also be played with true / false or positive / negative word or vocabulary categories *e.g.* part of the house / part of the body.

-- **Run and write.** Divide the board in half and the class into two groups. Give one student from each group a pen. You say a verb and the student has to run and write the past form of that verb on the board. The first student to do so wins one point for their team. It’s also good for past participles, definitions, opposites.

-- **Simon says.** Do what I say and not what I do. Very young learners, play Simon says with actions ‘Simon says lie on the floor’, etc. More advanced learners, teacher says “sit down” while standing up. Students who follow action rather than words are eliminated.

-- **Running dictation.** Short piece of writing on a piece of paper. Tack to board. In pairs, one student runs, remembers and dictates and the other writes. (Runner shouldn't see what the writer is writing). First to finish shouts "stop". Compare with original.

-- **Reading race.** Copy the questions for the reading onto cards and number them. Put them on a table in the middle. Students work in pairs / teams. The runner for team collects a question, reads, remembers and tells team. The team looks for the answers. Continue until one team has answered all questions.

**Settlers** that calm down an over-active and distracted class can be like copying, coloring, listening, or tests. For example:

-- **Bingo.** Good for very young learners. A grid with 6-9 spaces for each student. Brainstorm/ elicit a lexical set, *e.g.* animals, food, parts of the body. Individually, students choose one for each space in their grid and write the word in. Shuffle your flashcards and show a picture / point to the vocabulary in a random order. Students cross out the words you point to. When they've crossed out all of the ones on their grid they shout 'bingo'. It can also be done with infinitive and past simple or past participle of verb.

-- **Memory games.** Very young learners: flashcards or realia. Students look at them and try to memorize. Close their eyes. Take one away. What's missing? It can be played in pairs. OR ask the students to write down everything in picture of their textbooks from memory.

-- **A story with mistakes.** Reread a story they have heard in a previous class but change details (not grammar). Students listen and say ***stop*** when they hear a mistake. One points for identifying it and one points for correcting it.

-- **Round class memory test.** First student says 'I went to the supermarket and I bought

a pear', 2<sup>nd</sup> student 'I went to the supermarket and I bought a pear and a loaf of bread', 3<sup>rd</sup> student...and so on. Get whole class to remember everything at the end. It can be used with different vocabulary, *e.g.* 'I went to the zoo and I saw a ...'.

-- **Spelling test.** Choose 10 words from recent lessons to test students on.

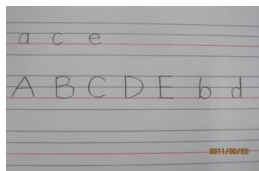
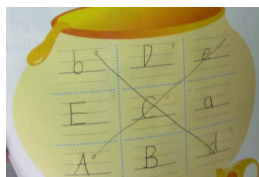
-- **Puzzles:** anagrams, words search, odd-one-out. There are often lots of these in the students' workbooks. Alternatively get students to write them for each other.

-- **Traditional dictation.** Choose a short text to dictate to students. They compare their versions with each other and then with the original. Students start with 20 points and take off a point for incorrect spelling, missing a word, adding a word that is not there.

Thus, when we identify stir / settle or involvement elements in this way, we have much more chance of avoiding a language lesson which is too energetic / noisy or one which is too sleepy / boring.

There are also two types of involvement. One is mentally engaging, and the other is physically occupying. Mentally engaging means some comprehension activities, such as games, puzzles, dictation, spelling test, and so on. Physically occupying is like copying, reading aloud, TPR, Simon says, jump the line, or run and touch. If possible, we can adapt the activities that are physically occupying to make them mentally engaging too.

In my class, I try to balance the stir and settle activities much more often after this course. I'd like to stir the students by 'run and touch' game first and calm them down by 'Bingo' game later when I teach alphabet. If they're too noisy, I will try to do 'memory' activity; on the contrary, if they're lack of energy, 'jump the line' activity will be a good choice. Moreover, I ask the children to copy the alphabet on the board AND put them into categories as they do so, *e.g.* categorizing the alphabet into one space (a,c,e) / two spaces (A,B,C,D,E,b,d), etc.. In order to stir students' involvement, I try to combine both and ask them to jump the line by categorizing the letters.



In conclusion, it would be better to increase young language learners' involvement by adapting activities that offer both mental engagement and physical occupation. It's important for us to choose a style of work that in terms of its stir / settle potential suits a particular class or occasion.

Finally, I am grateful for this teacher training program to Cambridge. It not only reinforces my English teaching knowledge and skill, broadens my horizons to the people and the world, but also benefits more young language learners in the long run.

#### Reference:

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