Teaching Young Learners to Think

ELT-Activities for young learners aged 6 - 12
Introduction

As they progress through their years of formal education, children need to acquire far more than the factual knowledge prescribed by curricula. They need to leave school equipped to face the challenges of a changing and unpredictable world. To do this they will need to develop a range of problem-solving and decision-making skills that enable them to assess new information, understand unexpected problems, and find appropriate ways of tackling such situations and of evaluating their success.

Many school curricula, however, are built upon systematic, error-free learning involving correct answers, the assimilation of facts, and reliance on the teacher for assessments of success. Yet life is not neatly packaged; it requires logical and creative thinkers who are able to access, interpret and question evidence, and to use information strategically in order to make wise decisions and solve unpredictable problems, both at work and in society generally.

An article in the newspaper ‘The Times’ in 2011 describes the interview process for entry to Oxford University in the UK. Examples of the questions asked of candidates included ‘Why do lions have manes?’ and ‘What heat does a hot air balloon need to lift an elephant?’ These questions do not have correct answers as such, but rather ‘are designed to help would-be students to show their potential by thinking on their feet’. Far from anticipating ‘correctness’, the tutors are interested in how logically and imaginatively an interviewee approaches a new idea or problem; this is the type of thinker sought by leading universities.

This book is designed to develop both language and the ability to think. It provides a selection of activities to engage young learners in purposeful use of language while at the same time using different thinking skills in order to complete the tasks.

Who this book is for

If you are a teacher of English as a foreign language to young learners in a primary or a lower secondary school and you would like your students to develop their thinking skills while having some meaningful language practice, you will find the activities in this book fit the bill. They can be used alongside any course book or teaching programme. You will find it easy to choose activities that are appropriate for your students, either by selecting a specific thinking skill that you want to develop, or by using an activity in order to revise or practise a particular language area in a way that is more cognitively challenging than the kind of revision or practice activities that you are using otherwise – or you may just want to break from your usual classroom routine and surprise your students with an activity that develops their thinking skills.
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If you are a teacher working at a school with an intensive bilingual (as it might be called in some countries) or ESL programme, then you too will find a range of activities in this book that are especially suitable for your teaching context. Teachers working within such programmes often look for activities that are cognitively challenging while at the same time offering a 'real' content focus (as in CLIL – content and language integrated learning – where the focus is on the simultaneous teaching of language and the 'real' content one would normally find in a primary or secondary curriculum for subjects other than EFL). The activities in this book offer students real-life thinking tasks, and involve them in dealing with information in such a way that it enriches their own thinking. They also help the students to organise information, and to develop, structure and evaluate their own thinking process; it therefore equips them with tools for lifelong learning.

If you are a teacher trainer working in pre- or in-service courses and believe that language teaching is a ‘total human experience’ (to quote a well-known dictum by Earl Stevick), then you may want to demonstrate to your trainees that teaching English as a foreign language can go beyond the teaching of the language and offer them excellent opportunities to help their students become better learners and thinkers through, and while, learning. It would be advisable to get your trainees to explore some of the thinking tasks in this book themselves so they get a taste of the approach before trying the activities with their own students. You may also want to recommend to your trainees some of the books we have listed in the bibliography on pp. 223-224.

Why this approach?

The rationale for combining the teaching of thinking skills with the teaching of a language is twofold. The first reason is concerned with the cognitive engagement of the learner in the task. There is a danger when activities are designed for second language learners of removing any intellectual challenge in the attempt to make the activity linguistically comprehensible. Children are frequently disenchanted by over-simple activities which are designed to suit their language level but are often way below their cognitive potential and therefore fail to provide a challenge. In presenting a cognitive challenge, we aim to keep the learners engaged in the activity. Children need to be challenged; they are capable of a high level of thinking if encouraged to do so.

The second argument is a linguistic one. Materials designed to teach a foreign language generally involve learners using the target language in order to communicate a piece of information to another person. Thus the language is meaningful. This is the basis of the communicative approach. The activities in this book require the learners to complete a task with a real purpose which is non-linguistic; to invent something, to solve a problem, to conduct an experiment. Language is the means of carrying out the task; the teacher therefore needs to help learners with the appropriate language for completing the task.
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In this book the children are using the language for a real purpose, that is, to solve problems and to think together. They are therefore engaged in meaningful language use which develops their language ability, while at the same time learning to think.

Can thinking be taught?

This is, of course, the key question and research gives mixed results. It is certainly true that thinking ability can be learnt; it can develop and improve; and that the teacher can play an important role in this. In 1999, Carol McGuinness reviewed the research into thinking skills on behalf of the Department for Education in England, and concluded that pupils benefit from being coached in thinking, and that success was due to good teaching methods, in other words, learning thinking works well when supported by the teacher (McGuinness, 1999). There are a number of research articles that document the success of different programmes of teaching thinking. A list of these can be found on the website for Kestrel Education under research articles (www.thinkingschool.co.uk).

In the UK, Kestrel Education, in conjunction with the Cognitive Education Centre at the University of Exeter, is now engaged in a national movement promoting the teaching of thinking in schools, running seminars and workshops on the subject and giving schools ‘accreditation’ as so called ‘thinking schools’.

The manifestation of the growth of the thinking skills movement is evident in the growing number of courses on teaching thinking. A look at the list of books provided on the Kestrel website gives some indication of what is available. In this introduction we can only review a few key courses. One well-known programme for teaching thinking is Feuerstein et al.’s Instrumental Enrichment (1980), which was developed in Israel (see Sharron & Coulter, 1996, and Williams & Burden, 1997, for descriptions of this programme). This is a highly structured programme of 14 groups of exercises aimed at developing the skills of careful analysis, systematic planning and organisation, and problem-solving strategies. There is also an emphasis on applying the strategies learnt in new and unfamiliar situations; this is called ‘bridging’. The programme has been used around the world with a range of age groups and abilities. Evaluations show positive improvement in thinking abilities, and point in particular to the importance of the teacher’s role in coaching or mediating the thinking process (see p. 15 for an explanation of mediation.) The Somerset Thinking Skills Course (Blagg et al., 2003) was developed in England based on Instrumental Enrichment, and also shows positive effects on thinking skills.

A somewhat different approach is taken in Matthew Lipman’s Philosophy in the Classroom (Lipman et al. 1980). His Philosophy for Children programme has been widely used in primary classrooms in around 30 countries. The programme is based on children engaging in philosophical discussions and working as a ‘community of enquiry’ where they generate and answer questions about philosophical issues.
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Thus it taps into children’s natural curiosity, engages them in a search for meaning, strengthens reasoning and argumentative skills, and enhances their self-esteem as well as their ability to work as part of a community.

There are also a number of different ‘thinking tools’ available. These include *Habits of Mind*, *Thinking Hats* and *Thinking Maps*. *Habits of Mind* is concerned with having a disposition towards behaving intelligently when faced with a problem; it includes such things as gathering data through all the senses, listening, persisting and thinking flexibly, and applying past knowledge to new situations (see Costa and Kallick, 2009). The six *Thinking Hats* provide a method of thinking constructively. Each of the six coloured hats represents a different mode of thinking: the white hat calls for information known, the red hat is about feelings and intuition, and the black hat is about judgement of what won’t work. Then the yellow hat is about positive feelings, the green hat about creativity and new ideas, and finally the blue hat is concerned with managing the thinking process (see de Bono, 1999).

Visual tools, as they are called, are frequently used to help us to organise our thinking; people often draw a diagram intuitively when they are thinking. We have included David Hyerle’s *Thinking Maps* here, as we have drawn on them in developing our activities in this book. *Thinking Maps* are visual organisers that help us to represent the cognitive processes that we use to make sense of our world, such as comparing and contrasting, understanding cause and effect, and classifying things (see Hyerle, 2008).

Through his research into human intelligence, Howard Gardner (1993) has clearly shown that there is no such thing as a single unitary mental capability that can be called intelligence, but that there are instead multiple intelligences. Gardner argues very convincingly that IQ tests and schooling in general usually only draw on two of the human intelligences: the linguistic and the logical-mathematical. Gardner, however, proposes eight different intelligences to account for a much broader spectrum of human capabilities that our thinking skills draw on. An application of the Multiple Intelligences theory to the teaching of teenagers and adults can be found in Puchta and Rinvolucri 2005.

One other issue that is frequently debated is whether thinking should be taught as additional to the curriculum – sometimes called a ‘bolt on’ approach – or whether it should infuse the curriculum, becoming part of each child’s life through every subject they are taught; for a full discussion of this issue see Burden and Williams, 1998. Meanwhile, we subscribe to the infusion approach, which provides part of our rationale for teaching thinking through a foreign language.