

Introduction

About this book

Why did we write this book?

There is a growing trend – almost global – towards lowering the starting age for children learning English as a second or foreign language. It is now not uncommon for three and four year-olds to attend English classes, and although such tuition is more often found in private institutions, state kindergartens may also provide English classes to children from the age of five or younger.

As writers, teacher trainers and teachers involved in teaching English to the very young, we felt inspired to write a book dedicated to this intriguing age group. The educational needs of these learners are different from those of older children, and our aim is to encourage teachers to reflect on these needs and understand more fully the role they play when educating the whole child. We feel that providing quality language tuition is about creating naturally meaningful experiences that encourage very young children to view themselves positively and become enthusiastic about learning the new language.

Who is it for?

This book is for teachers and teaching assistants working with three- to seven year-olds who are learning English as a foreign or second language. It is for teachers in kindergarten or the first year of primary school, for those teaching in extra-curricular programmes in institutes or academies and for those teaching privately. The book is also for those studying to become teachers of very young learners who are looking for ideas and activities to engage their future pupils in meaningful and imaginative ways.

If you are an experienced teacher of very young children who is looking for new ideas and activities, you may want to skip this Introduction. If you know what kind of activity you are looking for, check the Contents page for the relevant category, and find the activities which seem suitable for your class. By browsing through the information at the beginning of each activity you should be able to decide if it is appropriate, before continuing to read the instructions in more detail.

Alternatively, you might prefer to start by scanning through each chapter, making notes of the activities you wish to use with your class. With most of the activities, you will find suggestions for variations or extensions. Of course, you may then come up with your own ideas on how to change, extend or adapt an activity to the specific needs of your group of learners.

If you are a novice teacher or a teacher trainee, or have previously taught English to older learners, you might like to develop your understanding of very young learners and find out about some of the important principles behind teaching this age group.


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In this Introduction, we aim to provide information on the learning characteristics of this age group, how to create an optimal learning atmosphere in the classroom, and the qualities of classroom interaction that support children's learning processes in a natural way. You will find an outline of our educational vision, including the reasons why we believe that learning a foreign language early in life – with the proper help – can make a significant contribution to the overall development of young children.

Our views on teaching very young learners are based not only on some crucial research findings, but on our own classroom experiences, classroom observations and discussions with colleagues from a variety of countries. We encourage teachers to become conscious of their own educational vision through understanding child language development and child development in general.

How is this book structured?

The book starts with a series of practical tips and suggestions for the very young learner's classroom called *Tips for teaching very young learners*. The tips are organized into topics such as lesson planning, classroom management and observation techniques. They include practical ideas on how best to handle the challenges that typically arise in the young learners' classroom.

The main part of the book consists of a wide range of practical activities for use in the classroom. The majority do not require much preparation, and where drawings or handouts are needed, you can usually find them as illustrations or on separate photocopiable pages. The handouts and other materials can also be downloaded from the dedicated website. Material which is available to download is marked with the symbol .

The activities are organized into eight chapters:

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|---|-------------------------------------|
| 1 Class routines and classroom management | 5 Arts, crafts and displays |
| 2 Movement and games | 6 Exploring the world |
| 3 Songs, chants and rhymes for topics | 7 Thinking-based activities |
| 4 Stories and storytelling | 8 Pronunciation and early literacy. |

About very young learners

What is a very young learner?

Our term 'very young learners' refers to children between the ages of three and seven, who are just setting out on their educational journey. They are still making the transition towards being part of a group and understanding the meaning and structure of their educational life. They may or may not attend school daily and many of them have not learned to read in their own language yet.

Human beings start learning from the moment they are born and are naturally inclined to pursue activities which help them make sense of their world and their place in it. Play is central to this process, in that a child's desire to be doing things and choice of tasks is directly linked to how and what they need to learn. Learning at this age includes developing fine motor skills (for example, picking things up, colouring and cutting) and gross motor skills (for example, running, throwing and catching). For children in their early years, the huge task of understanding the natural and social world can be overwhelming, without adult guidance. We can enhance their play / learning to help them develop their confidence, co-ordination, understanding of logical sequences and thought processes by setting developmentally appropriate tasks.

How do very young children start using language?

The psychologist Jean Piaget stresses the idea that very young children are active learners. They interact with the world around them, and learning occurs because they want to solve problems posed by the environment. This is how a child's thinking is formed, and this is how a need to use language develops. The theories of the developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky go further: they stress the important role of social interaction and language in the child's development. When a child says 'apple', for example, this one word represents a whole sentence. It is through the interaction with an adult or older sibling – through the child listening to a fluent speaker's response to their utterance 'apple' that the child is learning language. This is illustrated in an authentic example of child-caregiver language quoted in Peccei (1999, p.100):

Child: (*picks up red bean bag in shape of a frog*) Santa Claus.

Mum: Santa Claus? That's a frog, honey. That's not Santa Claus. That's a frog. A red frog.

Child: Frog (*points to frog on car*). Sits.

Mum: Yes, he's sitting down. That's right.

What we can see from the example above is how the adult almost 'speaks for the child', thus modelling important language. The mother says what the child might say if she could express herself more fully. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) call the support the child gets through such intervention 'scaffolding', and we will see below how the experienced language teacher can use a similar technique in the language classroom to extend what the child is able to say.

A key quality in child development is the intimate relationship between thinking and talking. Whereas older children have learned to think *before* they talk, very young children form their ideas *through* talking. For them, speech is a way to actually work out what is in their minds, and helps them to learn to understand it.

Another feature of the way very young learners start using language is that they are at an early stage of literacy development. Some may recognize a few letters – those found in their name or the first letter in some familiar words. Some may also have learned to read a few words in a holistic way – words they frequently see in their surroundings, such as the name of their favourite breakfast cereal. Although some very young children's reading skills may be more developed, they are still only just embarking on the exciting journey of making sense of the written word. This means that reading and writing are not central to the learning process in the way they will be in later years.

How do very young learners develop cognitively?

According to educational philosopher Kieran Egan (1997), a person's intellectual growth happens naturally, through certain developments deeply rooted in our cultural history. In order for a child's intellect to grow appropriately, the development of certain 'cognitive tools' is essential. It is obvious that if we want to cut a wooden board in half we need a saw – a physical tool. Likewise, if we want to solve complex problems we need 'tools of the mind'. But the fundamental difference between physical tools and tools of the mind is that the former help us to manipulate the world around us, while the latter are about controlling ourselves, our body, our thinking and our emotions. The ability to use tools of the mind is an important step on the way towards learning socially acceptable behaviour.

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Below are a few of the building blocks of language that form important cognitive tools in early child development and that – as we will see later – are important teaching tools in the English language classroom too:

Rhythm and rhyme

In pre-literate days people had the ability to remember texts of sometimes epic length. Rhythm and rhyme were important mnemonic devices in this process of remembering. In our modern age it is still through rhythm and rhyme that children start remembering chunks of language. They also experience enormous joy through repeatedly hearing (and later joining in with) the rhythms and rhymes of language. Exposure to and playing with rhythm and rhyme help children develop an understanding of the patterns of language (sound patterns first) and also form cognitive tools they will later need for the understanding of structures.

Images and imaginative thinking

For young children, there is often no borderline between reality and imagination. For example, if the teacher uses a hand puppet in class, a four year-old recognizes that it is a puppet, and yet as soon as the puppet starts ‘talking’ (with the help of the teacher), the child reacts to it as if it were alive.

Such imaginative processes lead to the creation of images in the child’s mind. Understanding oral language not only requires the knowledge of words, but also the ability to create and use mental images. There is clear evidence that learners who are at ease with creating lots of images while listening to a story, for example, remember more language from it.

Storytelling

Stories play an essential role in the cognitive development of children. The story form is something people enjoy in all cultures. However, telling stories in class, as well as entertaining children, helps them develop an understanding of the world and their own life experiences. Stories communicate information and at the same time help us to understand how we feel about it. That’s why they are such a powerful form of language. Engaging very young children with stories is a time-honoured tradition which holds a central place in their language learning.

Small talk

For the very young, learning to engage in small talk is not just about getting used to an exchange of linguistic formalities. It is an important building block of cognitive development, and it has a key social function for the child. Learning to participate successfully in small talk strengthens the child’s self-concept and gives him / her a feeling of security and acceptance in society. Being accepted by their teacher and classmates is an extremely important experience for the child, and at the same time it is a precondition for developing social relationships and friendships.

What is the best age for learning another language?

Folk wisdom has it that the earlier a child starts learning a new language the better, and often, from their own personal experience, parents can see the advantages of learning a language from a very young age. There is the perception that children’s brains are more elastic and open, since they appear to be able to pick up languages from birth onwards.

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Evidence to support this belief is often based on studies involving immigrant families. In all likelihood, it is the youngest members of an immigrant family that will succeed in adapting perfectly to the new language environment. It usually takes them just a couple of years to develop native-like competence in the new language, and they seem to assimilate with ease the culture of the target country. Meanwhile, learning the language of their adopted country seems a much more frustrating process for their grown-up relatives. The older they are, the greater their chances of failing at becoming fully-functioning members of their new speech community.

But what about children learning a new language in a more formal environment, in other words, not as immigrants to a country where the language is spoken but in their own country, in kindergartens or pre-school groups? These groups are embedded in a different language, culture and environment from the new language the children are learning. That is a different story altogether. Recent studies have challenged the idea that very young learners have a cognitive advantage when it comes to learning another language in these circumstances. These studies cast doubt on the widely-held belief that one or two lessons a week can replicate the immersion experience of immigrant children, and can lead to comparable learning outcomes. Nevertheless, if language learning is integrated into the overall curriculum and carried out as naturally as possible, it can have positive effects on children's attitudes to learning English in their subsequent education. This makes an important contribution to their lifelong learning.

Is there a critical period for language learning?

The observation that young children are at ease with learning languages, while teens and adults often struggle to achieve a good level of proficiency in a new language, led to the development of the so-called *Critical Period Hypothesis* (CPH). The hypothesis claims that the best period for learning a foreign language is between the ages of approximately 2 and 12, and that due to neurological changes, humans are unable to learn a foreign language to native-speaker standard after the onset of puberty.

Intensive research has been carried out on the CPH since it was first proposed. Although scholars agree that age has an influence on language learning, there is no agreement on whether a critical period exists, or on how age actually influences language learning.

An alternative hypothesis is that there is not just one but several critical periods for learning language. This is due to the fact that linguistic competence consists of various aspects, only some of which are difficult to acquire as we become older. According to this view, input on the syntax and phonology of language needs to be provided before a certain 'door' in a child's brain closes. However, the successful acquirement of other aspects of a language, such as lexis and rules governing word formation (known as morphology), may be less dependent on age factors. This hypothesis goes some way to explain why adults are likely to be able to learn quite complex vocabulary, while other areas of the language (such as grammar and phonology) may cause them problems.

Of course, there are examples of adult learners who do not manage to build up a solid lexicon in the target language, or who have problems with morphology. Although this can often be explained by the learners' mature age and subsequent memory loss, there may be other reasons unrelated to biology, such as limited input, insufficient motivation, and time commitments to work, family and so on.

Finally, it should be noted that despite differences in their rates of learning, both children and adults who are learning a second language make many of the same omission, substitution, and misplacement errors that occur in the acquisition of their own language. These errors are a normal part of the

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developmental process and occur in first language development as well as in second language development. Errors, therefore, should be viewed less as evidence of failure and more as indicators of development.

Can only children acquire perfect pronunciation in a second language?

Although there are some well-documented cases of adults who started to learn a foreign language in upper secondary school or later and managed to achieve the performance level of native speakers, this proficiency in pronunciation seems to be a fairly exceptional phenomenon amongst adult learners. A number of empirical studies confirm what teachers of young learners have frequently observed: children are usually more successful in learning the pronunciation of a new language than adults.

Should very young learners be taught reading and writing in another language?

When we teach English to very young children, we naturally concentrate on speaking and listening skills. But what about reading and writing? Although they are often considered skills better left until later in education, there are some important issues to keep in mind when deciding if you will include literacy development in your class.

We communicate and share a wealth of information through the written form of language. Our environment is filled with text: on the streets where we live and shop, on the packaging of the products we buy and the books, papers and screens we read. The reasons for reading and writing are many and varied, but at the heart of it all is communication.

Children are surrounded by text in a similar way. Even before they are reading or writing, they are involved in 'literacy events', such as sending a birthday card to a friend, helping to make a shopping list, watching the opening titles of their favourite cartoon or being read to from a picture book. And in this day and age, the text that surrounds children is often English.

It stands to reason that children are in general comfortable with seeing symbols, words and signs that they have not yet learned to decipher. There is no reason why their English classroom should not reflect the real world by also being a text-rich environment. Labels on supplies (*pencils, glue, paper*), signs (*Story corner; What's the weather like today?*) and project titles (*The life cycle of a frog; Recycling*) are a great way to indicate different areas, routine activities and current topics without putting pressure on children to actually understand the words themselves.

What we are providing is a comfortable and safe environment that includes English text. We also do this when we read to children from story books with pictures or let them look through books in a reading corner, or when we play videos of songs with words and sentences appearing on the screen. What this kind of exposure does not provide, however, is an understanding of the relationship between the English alphabetic symbols and the sounds they most often represent.

The explicit teaching of the relationship between letters and their sounds has become more common in the very young learner's classroom these days and, if done in the spirit of play, it can add significant information to children's early literacy development. It provides them with some understanding of the process of reading and gives them practice in saying and hearing the phonemes more clearly. There is some evidence that learning the sounds at the beginning and ends of words also helps children to understand the spoken language, since they can break a sentence down and hear the individual words through a process known as 'edging'. Finally, many children are very keen to read and it is a shame to hold them back when they are ready to do so.

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The most important thing to keep in mind is that learning to read and write should be a pleasurable experience, full of fun and games. It should never be thrust upon the child as a test of their adequacy in the classroom. Children's first attempts at decoding words (even if they are heavily supported by accompanying images or if they are largely the result of learning something by heart), together with the first wobbly marks they make on paper, should be celebrated as a step towards a literate and independent future.

Our educational vision of teaching English to very young learners

How can we create the best learning environment for the very young?

Below you will find seven prerequisites for an optimum language learning environment:

- 1 **Teaching time and teaching quality.** An early language programme that aims to facilitate successful language acquisition requires intensive exposure to the language, and this requires time. But even if time is limited, the language learning experience can still be motivating for the learners; the *quality* of the learning experience can be optimized to ensure maximum engagement and interaction in the classroom.
- 2 **A teacher with an excellent command of the target language.** The teacher must have the ability to talk to children in a natural way, and to adapt his or her language to the children's needs. This requires great flexibility in the target language.
- 3 **A teacher with an innate understanding of how young children learn in natural ways.** This kind of empathy with the learner is important in any kind of educational context, but we believe it's essential for teaching early learners.
- 4 **A methodology that engages the learner as a whole person through multi-sensory learning processes.** This means that the children do not just watch and listen to the teacher presenting the new language, and later repeat what they have learned. They engage with the language through touch and movement *at the same time* as they are using their sight and hearing, as, for example in Total Physical Response activities (see Chapter 2). In such a classroom culture, learners will remember better what they are learning. No time is wasted on explicit grammar explanations.
- 5 **The right level of challenge.** In a learning culture, the level of challenge must be in proportion to the learners' prior knowledge and the skills they already have. In such an environment, learners are, at times, pushed to the limits of their present competence.
- 6 **Meaningful tasks,** which engage learners emotionally and can contribute to their cognitive development.
- 7 **A teacher who can speak the learners' own language proficiently.** If all the learners share a first language that is different from the teacher's, the teacher needs to speak their language, so that they can both anticipate comprehension problems and provide on-the-spot support, should problems occur.

How can we make the teaching of English to very young learners effective?

An effective approach to the teaching of English to very young learners will be based on a number of key building blocks or principles of teaching. The seven principles below serve as the underlying framework for the activities in the main part of this book. They are reflected in the methodology, the teaching techniques and the strategies suggested in the activities.

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1 *Develop thinking skills.*

According to Vygotsky's approach to early childhood education, children learn how to use tools of the mind from adults. But the tools are not just handed down – they need to be facilitated, or 'scaffolded' in the shared social space between adult and child. The early language learning classroom is an ideal place for this development of thinking skills.

If, after a TPR (Total Physical Response) activity, four-year-old Olivia starts rolling around on the floor while the rest of the class is standing in a circle waiting for instructions from the teacher, Olivia doesn't yet have the right cognitive tools to help her focus on the task. So the teacher will now help her focus (through scaffolding), by pointing at other children and saying, for example, *Look at Emily. She's standing still. Look at Emma. She is standing still. And look at Freddie. He is standing still, too. And now look at yourself. You are standing still, too. Very good, Olivia. Very good. We're all standing still.*

What happens in the shared space between teacher and learner will become automatic after some time, but the teacher's role in that process is vitally important. He or she observes the child and models the behaviour required as the next step in their development. The teacher uses gestures, symbols, images, gentle touch (culture permitting), and so on, to mediate or remind the child of the desired behaviour. Children that get such support regularly will gradually learn to do independently and confidently the things they could only initially do with help from an adult.

In the example of classroom language above, the teacher facilitates a child's insight into the kind of behaviour that works best in a certain situation. In similar ways, we can help children make more of the cognitive resources they bring to the classroom. Based on the belief that 'what a child can do with help today they will be able to do independently tomorrow,' we can help children become familiar with important concepts such as number, size, shape and space, and gradually help them build a coherent model of the world. There is a whole chapter in the book (*Chapter 7: Thinking-based activities*, pages 173–194) with ideas on how to do this.

2 *Provide optimal input.*

Since the written representation of the new language is less accessible to very young learners, sound is extremely important and attractive to them. At this age a great deal of language learning takes place through oral and visual activities – stories, songs, chants, rhymes, images and realia – and through gestures and movements, including games with simple rules.

As mentioned earlier, there is clear evidence that children learn a new language best when they are immersed in it; that is when their parents have emigrated to a new country and the children learn the language from their environment of friends, neighbours, teachers and others using the language naturally. Schools can never totally emulate such a situation. However, we believe that it is possible in non-immersion educational contexts to create conditions that turn language learning for very young learners into a meaningful and successful activity.

Our belief is based on personal experience, and on teaching we have seen in pre-schools in many countries around the world. Admittedly, this quality of teaching, where children often have ten or more hours of English a week, is more often found in private pre-schools or kindergarten language programmes than in state educational contexts. But we have come across this quality of teaching quite frequently in private schools in countries such as Spain, Turkey, Russia, China, South Korea and various countries in Latin and Central America.

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The way the teacher interacts with the children is crucial to how they learn to interact in and with the new language. In order to make the language learning experience as meaningful, enjoyable and natural as possible, teachers need to adapt the language they use to talk to their pupils in such a way that it becomes comprehensible. This requires the teacher to develop an ability that we often observe in parents, grandparents or other adult family members talking to very young children in their own language. They intuitively seem to ‘get it right’, so that children can understand them. It is a way of talking which is sometimes known as ‘motherese’ or ‘caregiver talk’, and it is a tactic that many of us adopt when talking to people who are less competent than we are: we use what is often called *foreigner talk*.

However, modified interaction need not always involve linguistic simplification. It may include elaboration, slower speech rate, using gesture and providing additional contextual cues such as images or realia. There are various other examples of teacher strategies which modify input, such as checking comprehension, clarification of requests and self-repetition or paraphrasing.

3 Go beyond an input–output model of learning.

Children love imitating what they see and hear, and imitation is a first important means of getting children to speak. Learning a language successfully, though, is not just about the children parroting what their teachers say. Using a language successfully is about being creative with it – and we can help learners make first steps towards this by going beyond a mere input–output model of learning.

Parents often measure the quality of their children’s language learning by the amount of language they are able to produce. Small wonder then, that teachers want to get children to learn to speak the language as soon as possible, first by imitating what they hear and then by gradually learning to say things that they want to say for themselves.

Children will love imitating anything that engages them emotionally. Hence, the capacity of the input to grab their attention is vital. For example, if children love a story they hear their teacher tell, or the character voices they hear on an audio recording of a story, they are more likely to start speaking along when the teacher next revises the story with them. Likewise, a catchy tune or the rhythm of a cool chant will help children remember important chunks of language more easily, and they will love singing or saying the words themselves.

Another key point that helps young children to develop their speaking skills is that they are often chatterboxes and they love to engage in small talk. In both child and adult conversation, small talk is fairly predictable (for example, *How are you? I’m fine, thanks.*). In other words, in small talk situations, speakers often use ‘formulaic’ or ‘prefabricated’ language, rather than creating utterances by putting them together word by word. So, if the teacher regularly engages their pupils in small talk in the target language, they learn to pick up important chunks of language, and gradually learn to be ‘chatty’ in a very natural and useful way. And not just in the target language: some children will transfer this valuable skill to their own language, helping them become more sociable and balanced individuals.

Quality of input plays an important role in the teaching–learning process, but in order for the learning to be successful we need to look beyond an input–output model. We need to investigate the physical and social dynamics of the very young learners’ classroom on the grounds that learning is not simply a cognitive process but is situated in its social context, and is physically ‘embodied’ through gesture, voice and movement. According to this view of language learning, we need to broaden our focus and take other factors into consideration: factors which can be defined as embodiment, embedding and

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extension. We need to look at how teacher and pupils are organizing their interaction using gestures, rhythm, body movements, and even teaching materials in tandem with their spoken language.

The following is an extract from a lesson in a pre-primary class of three and four year-olds that Herbert had the pleasure and the privilege to observe at the ABC private language school in Hong Kong:

The teacher is pointing at a picture in a book. It shows a smiling girl, with an apple and a piece of cake in front of her.

Teacher: Look at the girl here. (*The teacher points at the picture.*)
 Is she happy or sad?

Children: Happy!

Teacher: She's so happy! Do you think she likes apples?

Children: Yes.

Teacher: Yes, yes, yes! (*The teacher is speaking rhythmically, using her hands to support the rhythm of the language with a circular movement.*)

Do you think she likes cake? (*The teacher repeats the hand gestures.*)

Children: (*Some children are mirroring the teacher's hand gestures.*) Yes, yes, yes!

In fact, there is very little language 'production' in this scene of embodied interaction. The children are basically reacting to what the teacher says by echoing her words. But it is through the way the teacher uses gestures and body movement, and through the way the pupils mirror her behaviour and echo her language that they 'co-construct' the interaction in the classroom.

The teacher prompts the learners' first reaction (*Happy!*) by pointing at the picture and asking whether the girl is happy or sad. She has introduced the word *happy* in a previous lesson but assumes that her pupils will not yet be able to recall it, so she has decided to scaffold the pupils' language by offering them a choice of two possible answers (*Is she happy or sad?*). This strategy allows her pupils to say more in the target language than they would be able to without the scaffolding.

This is what follows, and again an analysis of the interaction should focus on the multimodality of the situation, not the language alone:

Teacher: OK, let's listen to the song first. (*While the teacher is about to start the CD, one of the children stands up and tries to go past the teacher towards the free space in front of the board.*)

All right, Linda, can you sit down again, please?

Linda: No!

Teacher: (*laughing*) No?

(Linda laughs too, and carries on moving towards the space, swaying slightly.)

Teacher: Ah! You want to dance. (*The teacher mimes dancing.*)

Do you want to dance?

Linda: Yes! Dance!

Teacher: Dance. Good girl. You want to dance.