

Amazing Young Minds Forum
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MATERIALS IN THE CLASSROOM WITH CHILDREN

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The enormous amount of existing materials for the teaching of English to young learners might lead us to think that everything has been invented and nothing is left to be discovered in EFL. But when you are in a real classroom working with children you realise that not all existing materials are equally successful in the class. Why is that? Why do children seem to like some of the materials straight away but do not pay attention to some others?

It is obvious that only successful materials meet the children's interests and take into account their psychological characteristics. Then, the question is: what are children like and what are the main practical implications in terms of materials for the EFL class?

Young learners are:

- **very receptive**

Children usually welcome whatever the teacher has to offer them. Unlike older learners, children are open to new ideas, activities and materials. Therefore lots of different materials and different activities related to them can be used in class, but it will be absolutely important to choose only those that are adequate for each particular class situation.

- **curious**

Anything that is new attracts children's attention, because children are curious by nature. Any novelty in terms of materials used in class will arise curiosity and interest. Very often very simple new material can lead to the most lovely activities and can generate lots of meaningful contexts for using the target language.

- **motivated**

Learning English is something that the children's parents respect. It is also something that older brothers and sisters do at school. They "want" to do the same. It is the teacher's responsibility to use the best approach and the best materials in order to foster the motivation that young learners bring to class.

- **able to pick up new sounds accurately**

This is a great advantage when learning the target language, since in further stages, learners will find it more difficult to cope with sounds that do not exist in their L1 phonological repertoire.

Besides, children are great imitators: they find pleasure in repeating sentences, words and in imitating sounds.

It is highly advisable that the materials used in class take this important issue into account.

- **spontaneous and willing to participate**

Children are less inhibited than older learners. They volunteer to participate in activities and they enjoy using the language in activities such as acting out roles, singing songs, reciting poems, etc. That means that they are ready to use the target

language in dialogues, games, act outs, storytelling and other situations presented in class. Using the language this way fosters *fixing* the language used.

- **physically active**

Physical movement is part of children's nature. Children are full of energy to be spent and they tend to move in class anyway. Therefore, activities that involve physical movement are always welcome by children. By using the language in activities that involve movement, mind and body become a single unit that help the children experience the language and internalise it .

- **interested on themselves and on what is "here now"**

Children are able to deal with situations, objects and things that are close to them and that are related to them. They are not interested in issues that do not belong to their near world. Real objects and familiar situations must be used in class.

- **deeply involved in the world of fantasy and imagination**

The real world around the children and the fantasy world that they can easily build are part of themselves and difficult to separate at certain stages in their development. Stories and situations where fantasy plays an important role will be successful in class.

- **highly linked to the teacher**

The younger the children are the closer to the teacher they feel: they seek the teacher's attention, his/her approval to the work done, they try to explain things that happened out of the classroom -at home, in the street, etc- to the teacher. Those situations constitute great opportunities for using the target language as much as possible: for appraisal, asking easy questions, agreeing or disagreeing, etc. in very real and contextualised situations.

- **developing their personality**

Children attending our classes are all different. Each of them has a potential in the different intelligences that needs to be developed: musical, mathematical, spatial, etc. It is the teacher's responsibility, our responsibility, to make the best of that potential, to make the children grow personally through the activities, materials and situations presented in class. We mustn't never forget that personal growth at this stage is much more important than just learning a foreign language or any other isolated subject.

Apart from the characteristics stated above, it is also very important to remember that children:

- **learn by doing**

All kinds of activities and materials such as arts and crafts, "making" things, etc. must be part of our teaching. We do not know how the acquisition of the language takes place, but experience shows that children who use the language for doing or making something, seem to fix the language more easily.

In this sense, though, it is important to find the balance between the amount of time devoted to the activity proposed and the amount of language that such activity generates. For example it would be wrong to devote an important part of the teaching time to drawing, cutting out, etc. if no language or only very little language is involved in the activity.

- **can't concentrate for a long time**

Therefore the materials presented have to be varied and they must be changed often within one class. Otherways the children will get tired and will not be able to follow.

- **do not analyse the language**

Any materials focusing on the analysis of the language have few possibilities of succeeding in a class of young learners: children look for meaning when learning the language.

- **are happier with different materials depending on the natural baggage they have on the different intelligences**

The teacher must cater for those differences and preferences and present the language in a variety of ways, using different materials, in order to make the language accessible to the different types of learners in a particular group class. Visuals, audio material, etc. will help different children to understand and use the language presented much more easily.

- **can't remember things for a long time if they are not recycled**

So, the materials used in class must reuse the language in different situations at short intervals. This implies that the teacher should never think that a particular topic has been "covered". The same language used in that topic should be used again in the near future in a different situation.

The materials chosen for a particular lesson, unit, term or school year must be varied, attractive, interesting, accessible, challenging, encouraging, surprising and, ideally, they must lead the children to achieve some kind of outcome.

We could summarize and say that ANY materials can be used successfully in class as long as they are carefully chosen and used with a clear purpose. Among the most successful materials and activities with young learners we should mention: TPR activities, stories, games, songs, chants, rhymes and poems, puppets, arts and crafts, computers, magic, drama activities, puzzles and problem solving activities, and . . . any other material that at a certain stage can make the learning of English a motivating memorable experience.

It is desirable that the materials used in the EFL class are presented in the form of teaching units in class, not as isolated activities. Within a teaching unit, the activities and materials mentioned above must be nicely linked and one activity must lead into the next so softly that children will not even notice.

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